

Beautiful and Damned: Geographies of Interwar Kansas City

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Abstract

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Between the World Wars, Kansas City, Missouri, achieved what no American city ever had, earning a Janus-faced reputation as America's most beautiful and most corrupt and crime-ridden city. Delving into politics, architecture, social life, and artistic production, this dissertation explores the geographic realities of this peculiar identity. It illuminates the contours of the city's two figurative territories: the corrupt and violent urban core presided over by political boss Tom Pendergast, and the pristine suburban world shaped by developer J. C. Nichols. It considers the ways in which these seemingly divergent regimes in fact shaped together the city's most iconic features—its Country Club District and Plaza, a unique brand of jazz, a seemingly sophisticated aesthetic legacy written in boulevards and fine art, and a landscape of vice whose relative scale was unrivalled by that of any other American city. Finally, it elucidates the reality that, by sustaining these two worlds in one metropolis, America's heartland city also sowed the seeds of its own destruction; with its cultural economy tied to political corruption and organized crime, its pristine suburban fabric woven from prejudice and exclusion, and its aspirations for urban greatness weighed down by provincial mindsets and mannerisms, Kansas City's time in the limelight would be short lived. In the end, Kansas City's apotheosis of identity was—like that of every city's—as tenuous as it was definitive.

## Contents

Introduction: Beautiful and Damned	1
I. The Core	8
II. The Periphery	68
III. Art and Artifice	119

A narrow outside balcony ran along the whole length of Karl's room. But what would have been at home the highest vantage point in the town allowed him here little more than a view of one street, which ran perfectly straight between two rows of squarely chopped buildings and therefore seemed to be fleeing into the distance, where the outlines of a cathedral loomed enormous in a dense haze. From morning to evening and far into the dreaming night that street was the channel for a constant stream of traffic which, seen from above, looked like an inextricable confusion, for ever newly improvised, of foreshortened human figures and the roofs of all kinds of vehicles, sending into the upper air another confusion, more riotous and complicated, of noises, dust and smells, all of it enveloped and penetrated by a flood of light which the multitudinous objects in the street scattered, carried off and again busily brought back, with an effect as palpable to the dazzled eye as if a glass roof stretched over the street were being violently smashed into fragments at every moment.

—Franz Kafka, *Amerika*

How strange to find that the present contained such a bright shard of the living past,  
damaged and eroded but not destroyed.

—Donna Tartt, *The Goldfinch*

Kansas City is a matter of opinion.  
It is either in the middle of nowhere or the middle of everything.

—Tracy Thomas and Walt Bodine, *Right Here in River City*

## INTRODUCTION: BEAUTIFUL AND DAMNED

*In the eyes of the moralist, cities afford a wider field both for virtue and vice; and they are more prone to innovation, whether for good or evil. ... [and] whatever may be the good or evil tendencies of populous cities, they are the result to which all countries that are at once fertile, free and intelligent, inevitably tend.*

—George Tucker, *The Progress of the United States*<sup>1</sup>

*The Bowery, the Barbary Coast, Chinatown, the Orient, Singapore and other notorious spots on the globe that have been in the spotlight of fact or fancy—none of them had anything on Kansas City, the ‘Heart of America,’ the city of beautiful homes, parks and boulevards, the ‘Gateway to the Southwest.*

—Lear B. Reed, *Human Wolves: Seventeen Years of War on Crime*<sup>2</sup>

The remnants of the old walking city were still visible, from the brick rowhouses and kaleidoscopic market of the North End to the Gilded Age mansions built by elites eager to escape the stench and cacophony of the West Bottoms—the floodplain landscape whose packing houses, mills, and railyards pulsed to the rhythms of slaughter and harvest. The years just before and after World War I had refashioned that rambling city, bringing with them new ways of life that made for a transformed urban experience. Zoning laws gave a new sense of order to the city’s appearance. An embrace of the automobile catalyzed a new breed of suburb—unhinged from the streetcar line—that drew more and more residents into a life of sylvan privilege that was increasingly independent of the urban core. And in that core, a deluge of capital, a widespread fever for speculation, and a revolution in architectural aesthetics yielded a crop of slender, radiant skyscrapers—structures whose unapologetic glamour helped confirm the reality that the city’s commercial and cultural heart was becoming a lifestyle as much as a place.

Yet as locals, journalists, and visitors saw it, there was something distinct about the landscape of Kansas City, Missouri, as it developed in the 1920s and ‘30s. In America’s nineteenth largest city, the suburbs seemed greener, the industry more muscular, and the urban core uncommonly energetic, incendiary, and rowdy. “In its railroad yards,” observed Shaemas O’Sheel in *The New Republic* in 1928, “the swift pulse of American commerce beats hugely,” a trait that was equally evident in the city’s factories and towering office buildings. Yet O’Sheel also noticed something else in the character of Kansas City: an overwhelming enthusiasm for the “centrifugal impulse” evident in its “glamorous regions” of suburbs, “which reward Success with everything that enters into the America’s domestic ideal, which give the city something to show to strangers, and which are undoubtedly the most potent of incentives to every forward-looking young man with a wife and kiddies.”<sup>3</sup>

Few American cities—and certainly none similar to Kansas City in size—inspired such polarized impressions. And if O’Sheel was sunny in his optimism for a “city of contrasts,” others spied a city whose energy and elegance were countered by darkness and depravity. English journalist Alfred Perry, for instance, was impressed by Kansas City’s sylvan glory, but noted that it coexisted with an

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Warren Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 240-241.

<sup>2</sup> Lear B. Reed, *Human Wolves: Seventeen Years of War on Crime* (Kansas City: MO: Brown-White-Lowell Press, 1941), 190.

<sup>3</sup> Shaemas O’Sheel, “Kansas City: Crossroads of the Continent,” *The New Republic* (May 16, 1928), 375-376.

urban core flavored by an incomprehensible level of vice and violence: “last year eighty-nine persons were murdered in this city,” Perry observed, noting that such numbers put Kansas City’s homicide rate above Chicago’s as well as that of the whole of England.<sup>4</sup> Other commentators gave an even greater emphasis to this surreal counterpoint. “Here is a paradox for you,” wrote syndicated journalist Westbrook Pegler in 1939: “Tom Pendergast, the Democratic boss of Kansas City, gives good, rotten government, and runs a good, rotten city whose conventional Americans of the home-loving, baby-having, 100 per cent type live on terms of mutual toleration with wide open vice and gambling.”<sup>5</sup> U. S. Attorney Maurice Milligan was similarly baffled, writing that he could not understand “how a city of beautiful homes, an imposing art center, with splendid public buildings, spacious parks and playgrounds, and other marks of culture and beauty could exist side by side with a corrupt machine run by a boss like Pendergast.”<sup>6</sup>

These impressions of a Janus-faced metropolis were not superficial hyperbole: they traced the contours of a city that was reaching its peak as a new metropolitan format and culture were emerging in the wake of World War I. When the United States Census reported in 1920 that, for the first time, cities housed the majority of the nation’s population, many Americans were aware that cities were also transforming in look, feel, and character thanks to unprecedented developments in economics, technology, governance, planning, and social norms. That new urban character was most apparent downtown. Downtown had long been the beating heart of the city, but the Jazz Age ushered in a newly feverish pulse thanks to an unprecedented level of activity and a new ethos of organization. More residents than ever were flooding the scene every morning to work in the office buildings that were increasingly calibrated mechanisms for organizing corporate labor.<sup>7</sup> Cars clogged the streets, patrons packed theaters to behold the new technology of the motion picture, and expanded power grids showered the tapering apexes of new skyscrapers with light and powered massive conveyor belts in new factories on the core’s edge to churn out an unprecedented array of new consumer goods for an increasingly affluent society. It is no wonder that F. Scott Fitzgerald noted in 1919 that midtown Manhattan had “all the iridescence of the beginning of the world,” or that sociologist Harvey Zorbaugh christened Chicago’s lakefront core “the city’s vortex” on the threshold of the 1930s.<sup>8</sup> Darker energies, too, defined the new cityscape; a surge in criminal activity during the ‘20s and ‘30s—a net result of Prohibition, economic depression, new weapon technology, and shortcomings in law enforcement—transformed many downtowns into centers of violence. The urban core, in short, had an unprecedented sense of productivity, exuberance, radiance, vice, and violence after the end of World War I.<sup>9</sup>

Yet if the metropolis of the ‘20s and ‘30s proved to be more centripetal than ever before, its centrifugal energies were equally strong. As *National Geographic* observed in 1923, “cities are spreading

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<sup>4</sup> Alfred P. Perry, quoted in William M. Reddig, *Tom’s Town: Kansas City and the Pendergast Legend* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1947), 142-143.

<sup>5</sup> Westbrook Pegler, “In Spite of All, Mr. Pendergast Runs a Good Town,” *Kansas City Journal-Post* (February 21, 1938), 13.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice M. Milligan, *Missouri Waltz: The Inside Story of the Pendergast Machine by the Man Who Smashed It* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1948), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Robert M. Fogelson, *Downtown: Its Rise and Fall, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 188-189.

<sup>8</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, “My Lost City,” in *My Lost City, Personal Essays, 1920-1940*, ed. James L. W. West III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 108; Harvey Warren Zorbaugh, *The Gold Coast and the Slum: A Sociological Study of Chicago’s Near North Side* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929), 2; John Dos Passos, in spellbinding prose, also captured the new downtown pulse in *Manhattan Transfer*: “Glowworm trains shuttle in the gloaming through the foggy looms of spiderweb bridges, elevators soar and drop in their shafts, harbor lights wink.” See *Manhattan Transfer* (1925; repr., New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 260.

<sup>9</sup> See Witold Rybczynski, *City Life: Urban Expectations in a New World* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 155.

out,” and were exhibiting clear signs of what sociologist Harlan Paul Douglass christened in 1925 as “the suburban trend”—a varied but coherent movement catalyzed not only by the new and transformative phenomenon of automobile ownership, but also by changing cultural impulses, heightened racial anxieties, and a robust economy in which homeownership was becoming a mainstay for the growing middle- and upper-middle classes.<sup>10</sup> The “spectre of decentralization” had long existed in suburban impulses, but never had it been so strong, so accessible, so widespread, and so diversified in its uses. If urban residents had felt at the outset of the 1920s that there was a natural equilibrium between business and retail concentration downtown and residential life on the periphery, by the end of the decade that framework had become more tenuous. Downtown still had a monopoly on white-collar working life, but the retail, entertainment, and social domains of suburbia were giving it a run for its money.<sup>11</sup>

The urban landscape that captured the attention of O’Sheel, Perry, Pegler, Milligan, and others was an exemplary case of these new metropolitan features. Yet what made Interwar Kansas City even more striking than most cities was its expression of an equally significant current in post-World War I American culture: the nearly overwhelming spirit of tension borne of a series of economic, cultural, and social transformations. Historian Michael Parrish designates the 1920s and ‘30s America’s “anxious decades” because of the unprecedented stresses these shifts inflicted on American life, particularly in cities.<sup>12</sup> From the freewheeling economy of the Jazz Age and the depths of the Depression, the piety of Prohibition to the national crime and vice surge of the ‘30s, and the shift from an America rooted in traditionalist, rural values to one that accepted the compartmentalized, secularized, commercialized ways of urban life—this was an era characterized by polarized extremes, contradictions, and uncertainty.<sup>13</sup> It was not for nothing that Willa Cather wrote that “the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts,” an allusion in part to the unprecedented gulf in America that opened up during the Jazz Age between those embracing progress and those anchored to the ways of the past.<sup>14</sup>

Historians have characterized the era’s anxiety-ridden polarities in terms of the social and cultural gulf between the city and the country and their respective mindsets. In reality, however, cities like Kansas City were also stages where the era’s struggles between progressive and traditional ideals played out.<sup>15</sup> When O’Sheel described Kansas City as a place of contradictions, after all, he invoked the city’s simultaneous urbanity and provincialism: “Prim ideals and prim homes; love-making in parked cars and the flappiest flappers in the shortest skirts doing the most daring dances to the jazziest music in the perfectly respectable amusement parks. Irish Catholic Democratic bosses and German Catholic Republican bosses picking mayors from the ranks of prominent Masons and Klansmen;

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<sup>10</sup> *National Geographic* quoted in Joel Kotkin, *The City: A Global History* (New York: Modern Library, 2005), 116; Harlan Paul Douglass, *The Suburban Trend* (New York: Arno, 1925), passim.

<sup>11</sup> Fogelson, *Downtown*, 194-201.

<sup>12</sup> Michael E. Parrish, *Anxious Decades: America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920-1941* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), ix-xii.

<sup>13</sup> Cultural historian Warren Susman describes the 1920s and ‘30s as the “crucial and . . . climactic stage” in America between two “rival perceptions of the world,” one traditionalist, conservative, and rural and the other progressive, urbane, and secular in its embrace of modern life. See *Culture as History*, xx.

<sup>14</sup> Willa Cather, *Not Under Forty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), v.

<sup>15</sup> See Ronald Allan Goldberg, *American in the Twenties* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 19. An exception to this tradition of cleaving the rural from the urban experience in characterizing the split between progressivism and conservatism during the 1920s appears in the work of Charles J. Shindo, who invokes Paul Carter’s 1968 work *The Twenties in America*, and in particular its emphasis on ambiguity and “shades of grey” to understand the defining cultural dichotomies of the decade. See *1927 and the Rise of Modern America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 8.



political incompetence—even the graft is petty—civic narrowness, despite endemic luncheon clubs.”<sup>16</sup> Kansas City, in other words, was a place where the city and the small town, the progressive and the regressive, the conservative and the traditional, seemed not only to collide, but to blend together.

If Interwar Kansas City was an archetypal expression of the anxieties besetting America, then it expressed those anxieties with a flavor all its own. All cities share commonalities of broad economic, social, and cultural influences, but, in the words of Witold Rybczynski, “cities and towns, like customary dress and food, have always been local responses that incorporate local needs and local dreams.”<sup>17</sup> The ways in which their leaders and citizens navigate the broad particulars of their historical moment more often than not yields a distinct urban character—a look, feel, and sense of place that is often as abstruse as it is unmistakable. That unique character is often most clear cut in cities that are experiencing their golden age—a moment that urbanist Peter Hall attributes to a trifecta of conditions: a robust economy that is simultaneously advanced and pliable; an established and coherent “style of living” for the majority of the population; and a critical but serendipitous convergence of personalities whose creativity and ideas catalyze exceptional material or intellectual contributions to the urban scene.<sup>18</sup>

The Interwar years supplied Kansas City with all three. After the Armistice, the city’s agricultural economy matured into one based on a broad array of manufacturing and the production of consumer goods. The newly developed economic health was evident in the city’s new buildings, its growing middle and upper-middle classes, and in its expanding industrial districts. Coupled with this maturation was a more developed sense of urban character—one that fused heightened aspirations to urban greatness with a palpable spirit of rural values that infused the city’s built environment, political culture, and residential life. The city’s stroke of luck and circumstance was the rise of two key personalities—a precocious real-estate developer and an infamous political boss—both of whom would reshape old ways of governance and development to fit a new era of urban life, with respective degrees of success that were unmatched in other American cities. If Democratic boss Tom Pendergast was the prevailing character for Kansas City’s criminal reputation, then its suburban achievements were attributed to Jesse Clyde “J. C.” Nichols, a tour de force of a real estate entrepreneur whose thirst for profit was married to an insightful understanding of aesthetics and stability—two elements the American capitalist impulse had long brushed aside.

The city of contrasts that developed under these conditions expressed more than an unprecedented zeitgeist. It also demonstrated a deep reality about modern life. To be modern, writes Marshall Berman, is not to be defined by unchecked progress or technological prowess. It is to be tumbling in a maelstrom of paradox and contradiction. “Modernity,” he writes, “is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity.” It is to be both revolutionary and conservative, beautiful and terrible. “To be modern,” in fact, “is to be partly anti-modern.”<sup>19</sup> And cities, as the greatest expressions of modern life, have much to reveal about the ways in which seemingly oppositional qualities—triumph and tribulation, beauty and grotesqueness, joy and misery, breathless thrills and anxious dread—can coexist

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<sup>16</sup> O’Sheel, “Kansas City: Crossroads of the Continent,” 378.

<sup>17</sup> Rybczynski, *City Life*, 50.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Hall, *Cities in Civilization* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 10-21. Hall invokes French critic and historian Hippolyte Taine’s notion of “the general state of manners and mind” to explain the concept of a “style of life” that characterizes a city.

<sup>19</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 14, 24. Berman’s target is a tradition of twentieth-century thinking that veers towards “rigid polarities and flat totalizations”—trends he sees as divergent from the writings of the great nineteenth-century commentators on modern life (and chiefly Kierkegaard, Baudelaire, Goethe, Marx, and Nietzsche) who, for all their differences, all maintained a fixation on “self-irony and inner tensions” that they saw as defining the age of modernization.

in an urban scene. It is through strange, “workable tensions,” as one geographer terms them, that cities carve out, often without meaning to, a unique sense of place—one that is often as tenuous as it is definitive.<sup>20</sup> As a maelstrom of bold tensions—of downtown energy and suburban quietude, of technological progress and aesthetic conservatism, of political reform and doubling-down of old ways—the built, social, and cultural landscape of Interwar Kansas City offers a one-of-a-kind masterclass in the urban contradictions in the pivotal age of the American city.

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My story begins in the center of it all. By the late 1930s, Kansas City’s urban core had taken the shape of a mature city that expressed the substantial political thrust and economic power of a centripetal center. Jazz Age skyscrapers were adding whimsical verticality to the skyline, industrial districts and an airport were giving the place a sense of productive and technological sophistication, and New Deal buildings expressed a new scale of governmental power. Yet if these new additions symbolized a newly modernized cityscape, then they accompanied a tangential landscape that represented a modern twist on an old institution: that of Tom Pendergast’s Democratic machine. Between 1925 to 1929, Pendergast would expand on his late brother’s territory of power to achieve a new scale of control, and in doing so would form alliances of unprecedented soundness with both organized crime and City Hall to yield the most intractable political force ever seen in any American city.

My first chapter tells the story of this urban core—the epitome of a “wide-open town” where the glamour of new skyscrapers rubbed shoulders with one of the country’s most expansive landscapes of crime, corruption, and vice—a network of nightclubs, gambling dens, and brothels that was no longer concentrated in poor immigrant areas, but that reached across the urban core. Touring these spaces and describing their energies will entail describing the economic and cultural forces that were reshaping the city, and I will trace several themes that will recur in subsequent chapters: the propensity of Kansas City’s leaders of recalibrating old institutions to fit new goals; the failure of the city to completely shed its rural sensibilities no matter the degree of urbanization; and the inevitability of spatial and social cleavage in a city whose leaders were reaching for unification and broadly realized power. These elements, I suggest, helped ensure that Kansas City’s embodiments of larger urban trends retained a unique flavor.

An antidote to this schizophrenic world, I’ll show in chapter 2, was the domain of the “South Side,” a quadrant of the city that showcased the nation’s most qualitatively successful large-scale suburban housing development for the affluent. As developer J. C. Nichols had extended and galvanized the suburban impulse along the southern edge of the city beginning in 1908, he created a new logic of spatial aesthetics and community values that accommodated the rapidly expanding wealth and social impulses of the city’s middle and upper-middle classes during the ‘20s and into the ‘30s. Building on the city’s track record of urban beautification established during the City Beautiful era, Nichols adapted grand landscape elements to a suburban paradigm. By orienting City Beautiful ideals around the private domain of the single-family home, as well as to the emerging impulse of racial segregation, Nichols initiated a tectonic shift in the city’s aesthetic and social fabric—one that created

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<sup>20</sup> See Mark Rose, “‘There is Less Smoke in the District’: J. C. Nichols, Urban Change, and Technological Systems,” *Journal of the West* 25, no. 1 (January 1986), 46. The perspective of the significance of contradiction in terms of accounting for the uniqueness of place has been largely absent from academic writing, even as it has often informed, in varying degrees, some of the most compelling works on specific places: Joan Didion’s *Salvador* and *Miami*, as well as her writings on Honolulu and Los Angeles; Robert Hughes’ *Barcelona*; John Hooper’s *The New Spaniards* and *The Italians*; and Orhan Pamuk’s *Istanbul*.

a pristine world that seemed to be the negative image of the centripetal downtown with its commerce, vice, and crime.

My second chapter will elucidate this iconic landscape of Kansas City's suburban persuasion. This task will involve showing how the nation's most lauded automobile suburb was more than a respite from downtown; it was also an alternative. In addition to fine homes, the Country Club District was home to high-rise apartment buildings and the Country Club Plaza shopping district, opened in 1922 as the first automobile-accessible, regional shopping complex in any city. With this diversity of housing, substantial commercial activity, and a grand landscape theme that stitched it in with the existing urban fabric, Kansas City's suburban domain became more than simply a sylvan stronghold: it became a legitimate alternative to the core, not to mention a veritable symbol of Kansas City itself. The suburbs of Kansas City, in other words, were challenging the core, and were doing so in a way unmatched in any other American city.

In the third and final chapter, I'll turn to one of the marks of any mature metropolis: the economy of artistic production. During the 1930s, Kansas City made a name for itself in the artistic when it opened the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in December 1933—a striking event in the depths of the Depression. Two years later, famed muralist and Missouri native Thomas Hart Benton was invited to head the painting department at the Kansas City Art Institute (KCAI), a school that had recently expanded and moved to a site adjacent to the city's commanding new museum. Yet Kansas City was no New York or Paris or even Chicago, and it was quickly apparent that its artistic sphere was a troubled one. That sense of trouble, we'll see in chapter 4, was due not only to a set of problematic ideas and practices that pervaded the arts scene, but also to the fact that fine art had become a profoundly territorial enterprise in an increasingly divided city. With the Nelson-Atkins and KCAI nestled in the city's pristine suburbs, art seemed somehow removed and thus opposed to the city's core.

Yet that core, I will suggest, was home to the city's only genuine art form—a style of jazz known for its unique swinging beat, saxophone-heavy timbres, and iconic, all-night jam sessions. Fostered by the city's wide-open reputation, jazz was the most powerful mode of expression for black musicians flowing into the city from every corner of the hinterland. It was also the most unstable. Resting on the tenuous economic and social infrastructure of the city's machine politics, jazz was an art form produced on borrowed time, and it would stand as an apt metaphor for a city whose glory days were swiftly ended after the political machine toppled in 1939.

If the schizophrenic identity of Interwar Kansas City was definitive, so too was it precarious—a reality that explains why (as is the case with many urban heydays) its peak years were remarkably brief. After all, the uneasy spatial and aesthetic cleavage into core and periphery, the incendiary violence and unsettling vice, the socially disastrous effects of two unjust regimes of city building, and the provincialisms that pervaded the city's artistic livelihood—these components did not constitute a tempered or cohesive metropolis.

But perhaps the city's fragility was also because Kansas City was an overheated version of the “American case” that Henry James had glimpsed in turn-of-the-century Philadelphia: “the way in which sane Society and pestilent City, in the United States, successfully cohabit, each keeping it up with so little of fear of flutter from the other ... the machine so rooted as to continue to defy removal, and the family still so indifferent, while it carries on the family business of buying and selling, of chattering and dancing, to the danger of being blown up.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Henry James, *The American Scene* (1907; repr., Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 283-285.

And decoding this “mystery of the terms of the bargain,” thought James, was not simply an “interesting thing to get at”; it offered something far more revealing—a glimpse of “the thrilled sense of a society dancing, all consciously, on the thin crust of a volcano.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

## I. THE CORE

By 1915, Kansas City's urban core hummed with the energies of an archetypal boomtown of the American heartland—one that was discarding its frontier sensibilities in favor of a modern future. The city that had germinated as a rowdy outpost of the river-caravan trade—a locale that “sprawled in the mud” along the floodplains at the convergence of the Missouri and Kansas Rivers—had become one of elegant office buildings, an expansive parks and boulevard system, and new residential districts.<sup>23</sup> The city's original lowland districts were still energized by rail yards, factories, packing houses, and immigrant neighborhoods, but those areas now sat in the literal and figurative shadows of the bluff-top commercial core whose energies seemed oriented towards the south and east. In those directions, a grid of roadways built and expanded throughout the 1880s, '90s, and 1900s had carried residential development, streetcars, and commerce across the undulating prairie, signaling a new period of spatial, social and economic expansion.

No building better expressed the new era of the heartland's most explosive boomtown than Union Station, built between 1913 and 1914 on a five-and-a-half-acre site a half-mile south of downtown on the new belt line railway that cut diagonally southwest across the city. (Figure 1) Formally dedicated with a three-day celebration in October 1914, Union Station was sized and styled for a modernizing city that could compete with the brightest stars in America's urban hierarchy. “The idea of the architect to produce a structure worthy of Kansas City's well-established position as the gateway to the great Southwest has been gloriously realized,” puffed the President of the Kansas City Terminal Railway Company—the entity officially responsible for building the largest and most expensive train terminal in the United States outside of New York.<sup>24</sup> The statement was apt. Designed by Chicago-based architect Jarvis Hunt, Union Station bespoke dominance and gravitas. A head house and two flanking wings added up to a frontage of 510 feet. On the primary facade, three immense arched windows—each topping out ninety feet above the sidewalk—divided the Bedford stone façade into three bays separated by pairs of Doric columns. The pylons and entablature framing this arrangement were ponderous in their dimensions, and punctuated with quoins and dentils.

Yet this grandiose exterior was merely a prelude. Inside, a cavernous main ticket hall, large enough to “swallow a village,” boasted a polychromatic marble floor nearly the size of a football field, marble walls adorned with fluted pilasters and florid capitals, and—ninety feet above the floor—a coffered ceiling whose golden plaster filigrees embroidered panels of sky blue and deep red.<sup>25</sup> Three circular chandeliers, each weighing 3,500 pounds, hung like massive, illuminated halos, and a grand clock—the focal point of all monumental station interiors—hung above the massive entrance to the waiting room. The ticket booths, housed in a sweeping semicircular structure that extended out of the south wall, added a further note of commanding elegance.

As a mature expression of the City Beautiful ideal, which had transformed sections of America's shoddy cityscapes into functional corridors and nodes of monumental grandeur, Hunt's design was as structurally innovative as it was beautiful.<sup>26</sup> In one of the first stations to eschew the traditional train shed for a grand waiting room, Union Station boasted a colossal space—410 feet long

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<sup>23</sup> Albert D. Richardson, quoted in Henry J. Haksell, “Kansas City: Houn' Dawg vs. Art,” in Duncan Aikman, ed., *The Taming of the Frontier* (1925; repr., Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1967), 208.

<sup>24</sup> H. H. Adams, “Kansas City's New Union Station,” *The Rotarian* 4, no. 9 (May 1914): 57.

<sup>25</sup> O'Sheel, “Kansas City,” 375; William Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 205.

<sup>26</sup> Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement*, 199-201. For an explanation of the City Beautiful movement's functional components, see the same volume, 82-83.

and 80 feet wide—extending off of the grand lobby that could accommodate 750 passengers.<sup>27</sup> Those passengers, when prompted, would descend via stairwells to the platforms below. Meanwhile, those alighting would approach the grand lobby through separate stairwells and hallways, ensuring an efficient passenger turnover. The services provided in the head house were also clustered to minimize crowding and congestion. The eastern and western wings extending off of the main lobby handled baggage and services, respectively. Whether waiting for trains, handing off luggage, enjoying a casual lunch or an elegant dinner in the main dining facilities, or paying a last-minute visit to a barber, the drug store, or the newsstand, patrons of Union Station experienced a space that did not sacrifice elegance in its pursuit of functionality and convenience.<sup>28</sup>



Figure 1: A crowd gathers outside Union Station for the dedication of the Liberty Memorial site dedication in 1921.

*Mrs. Sam Ray Postcard Collection*

*Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library (hereafter MVSC, KCPL)*

Monumental buildings were *de rigueur* expressions of urban power around the turn of the twentieth century, but no other building in any city stood as such an appropriate symbol of urban origins, goals, and impulses. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Kansas City sat as one of several competing outposts marking the extreme western edge of American settlement beyond the dominating colossus of Chicago. Yet after urban boosters successfully courted the Hannibal and St. Joseph-Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad to build a line from Cameron, Missouri, to Kansas City, and to bridge the Missouri at the latter point, the stalemate was decisively broken. With a direct line to Chicago, Kansas City quickly edged out the other cities of the Missouri River Valley to become the primary meat-packing and transportation center of the central west. By the 1880s, stabilized tariffs, fair railroad competition, and reliable commodity flows had transformed Kansas City into the

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<sup>27</sup> Carroll L. V. Meeks, *The Railroad Station: An Architectural History* (1956; repr., New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 112.

<sup>28</sup> “Union Station,” Mounted Clippings File (1900-1949), Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library (hereafter MVSC, KCPL).

“crossroads of the continent”—the lynchpin where the bounty of the expanding west was funneled to markets of the north and east.<sup>29</sup>

Yet Kansas City’s Union Station was also a consummate symbol of a city that had finally overcome its frontier origins. “The Kansas City of 1891,” remembers William Allen White, “was an overgrown country town of a hundred thousand people . . . consciously citified, like a country jake in his first store clothes.”<sup>30</sup> This characterization—common among many who attempted to capture the young city’s vibe—owed much to the city’s defining geographic feature. Aside from an expanding commercial district atop the bluffs that loomed over the rivers, a great deal of Kansas City—both spatially and symbolically—still sat in the flood-prone districts nestled in the river bottoms where the city had first taken hold. A landscape of saloons, cheap hotels, gambling dens, brothels, rail yards, factories, and packing houses was any given visitor’s first image of the city when they alighted at the city’s original Union Depot, a rambling Victorian building hemmed in by the craggy bluffs rising towards downtown and a rowdy stretch of Union Avenue that led to what many called “the wettest block in the world.”<sup>31</sup>

It is no wonder that passengers alighting from one of the 175 daily arrivals that choked the station’s insufficient platforms by 1900 were preoccupied with this area of Kansas City, and in particular with its unpleasant sights and smells.<sup>32</sup> “Unattractive in a high degree,” the city’s flatland districts seemed to eclipse the more promising upland areas of the city.<sup>33</sup> When an English visitor discovered that she would have to endure a fourteen hour layover in the city on her way to Denver in the mid-1870s, her “heart sank.” “For of all places to wait at, a more unpleasant one on a hot day than Kansas City, which we reached about 8 am, can hardly be found.”<sup>34</sup> Journalist Emma Gage had a similar reaction some fifteen years later, remarking that “a lady cannot wear a white dress more than once” in Kansas City, for “little specks of greasy smut float about in the air, and lodge everywhere.”<sup>35</sup> Even as late as 1908, publisher Henry Holt deemed Kansas City “the busiest and smokiest workshop I have ever seen . . . a place not fit to live in.”<sup>36</sup>

Such impressions would be a thing of the past after Union Station opened its doors—a fact reinforced when officials decided to burn an effigy of the Union Depot as part of the new station’s dedication.<sup>37</sup> The symbolism of architectural and geographic triumph was clear. Oriented towards the city’s horizon of urban expansion, the new railroad palace reinforced the tectonic shift that had transformed the city’s original geographic order. As Progressivist city planning enthusiasts, stable land markets, and a growing cadre of builders extended the city in its unimpeded southward direction, they tipped the balance in favor of the upland districts. The construction of Union Station in the heart of this expanding landscape was a consummate development—one that, so declared two journalists,

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<sup>29</sup> Charles N. Glabb, *Kansas City and the Railroads: Community Policy in the Growth of a Regional Metropolis* (1962; repr., Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 3, 189-192.

<sup>30</sup> William Allen White, *The Autobiography of William Allen White* (New York: MacMillan, 1946), 205.

<sup>31</sup> Reddig, *Tom’s Town*, 27-28.

<sup>32</sup> “Union Station,” Mounted Clippings File (1900-1949), MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Dudley Warner, “Studies of the Great West: VIII. St. Louis and Kansas City,” *Harper’s* 77 (October 1888): 760.

<sup>34</sup> Rose G. Kingsley, *South by West; or Winter in the Rocky Mountains and Spring in Mexico* (London: W. Isbister, 1874), 33-34.

<sup>35</sup> Emma Gage, 1898, cited in Rick Montgomery and Shirl Kasper, *Kansas City: An American Story* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star Books, 1999), 100.

<sup>36</sup> Henry Holt, “A Foreign Tour at Home,” *Putnam’s Monthly and The Reader* 3, no. 6 (March 1908), 646-648.

<sup>37</sup> *Kansas City Times* (October 8, 1914); *Kansas City Star* (October 20, 1914); both in “Union Station,” Mounted Clippings File (1900-1949), MVSC, KCPL.

“lifted the city’s center of gravity” from the crowded and filthy landscape of its river-bound origins “to the route of progress on the hills.”<sup>38</sup>

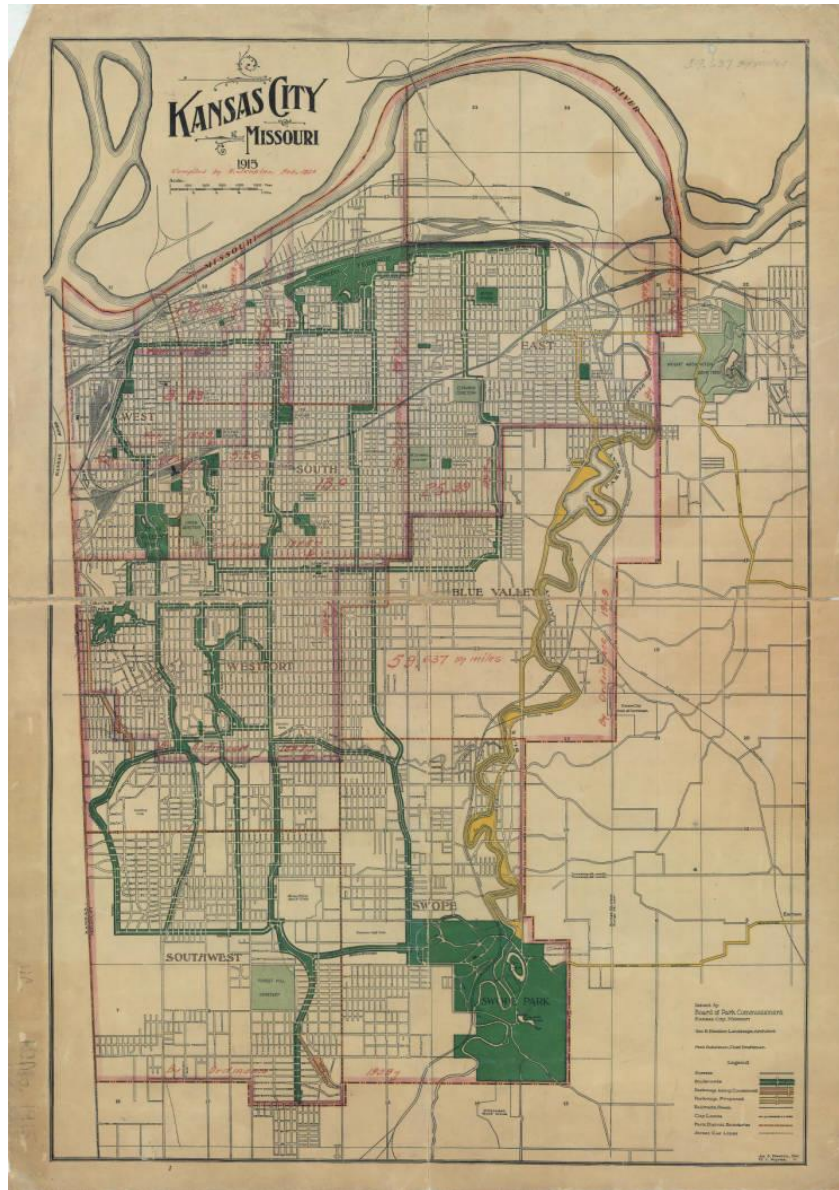


Figure 2: This 1915 map of Kansas City shows the extent of the fully realized Parks and Boulevard network. The large park in the southeastern corner is Swope Park, a 1,334-acre space bequeathed to the city by an eccentric hermit named Thomas Swope in 1896.

*SC117, Series 3-5: Kansas City, Missouri-Parks & Public Transportation #6, MVSC, KCPL*

That route had additional components. By 1915, Kansas City had finally completed the landscape feature that would become its infrastructural trademark: a Parks and Boulevard system that entailed two thousand acres of parks, 676 parkway acres, and ninety miles of drives and boulevards

<sup>38</sup> Henry C. Haskell, Jr. and Richard B. Fowler, *City of the Future: A Narrative History of Kansas City, 1850-1950* (Kansas City, MO: Frank Glenn Publishing, Inc., 1950), 107.



served as a latticework that bound the growing city together.<sup>39</sup> (Figure 2) Pushed by Progressivist reformers in the 1880s and -90s, the system was the *magnum opus* of George Kessler, a German-American landscape architect who eschewed harsh axial designs in favor of a meandering grammar of roadways and parks that accentuated the crests and valleys of Kansas City's undulating topography.<sup>40</sup> The first parks and drives traced the neighborhoods just east of downtown, but by the turn of the century, stately boulevards like The Paseo, Gillham Road, and Broadway Boulevard were pushing southward as the city sought to both remake unsightly areas and create a cohesive latticework for new development. The results garnered national renown. In 1916, *Architectural Record* declared it the most extensive system in the country for a city of Kansas City's size, and in 1922, a planning expert from Philadelphia wrote that "of all the ... accomplishments that American cities can boast, none surpass the parks and parkways system of Kansas City ... in its completeness, its pervasiveness, in the way it reaches every quarter and section of the city, [and] that it surpasses the park systems of other cities in the world."<sup>41</sup>

By 1910, as land markets had stabilized, builders had begun stocking the neighborhoods along the new parkways with vernacular styles of architecture that gave the city a look that was elegant, cohesive, and singular. For the city's expanding middle classes, the "shirtwaist" was the home of choice. Modified from the American foursquare plan, the typical shirtwaist wore a first-floor "skirt" veneered in limestone or brick and a second and third story "blouse" faced with wood shingles, clapboard, or stucco—all of which was finished off with a broad front porch and a wide, gabled roofline. Averaging 2,500 square feet, shirtwaists were half the size of the city's larger homes, but nonetheless provided ample space for the families of laborers and lawyers alike to fill with Victorian globe lights, Prairie style wood furniture, and wallpaper traced with Viennese geometrics and Art Nouveau florals.<sup>42</sup> For those seeking the fiscal or lifestyle benefits of multi-unit living, Kansas City's builders provided an elegant version of the three-story Boston walkup, which they modified with broad front porches to accommodate the hot Midwestern weather and soaring columns to create a sophisticated look well suited to the city's elegant new boulevards. A fixture of both Kansas City's middle-class side streets and elegant boulevards, colonnade-style apartments housed families, wealthy couples, and newly arrived singles, and often shared streets with single-family homes.<sup>43</sup>

Even the mansions of the elite—which often eschewed vernacular trends—took on a local look. As the rich moved from their Queen Anne homes in centrally located Quality Hill to new suburbs east and south of downtown, many began to build homes in varied styles that were veneered from top to bottom with native, roughly cut limestone—all quarried from the copious deposits that laced the city. These "big-gusty" houses became a fixture in suburbs like Pendleton Heights, Hyde

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<sup>39</sup> Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement*, 211.

<sup>40</sup> William H. Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement in Kansas City* (Kansas City, MO: The Lowell Press, 1964), 48-49.

<sup>41</sup> George B. Ford, *Architectural Record* (December 1916), 498-504; Janice Lee, David Boutros, Charlotte R. White, and Deon Wolfenbarger, *A Legacy of Design: An Historical Survey of the Kansas City, Missouri, Parks and Boulevards System, 1893-1940* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Center for Design Education and Research, 1995), xix; Board of Park Commissioners, Kansas City, MO, "Report of the Board of Park and Boulevard Commission of Kansas City, Mo., for the Fiscal Year Ending 1911," 5. See also C. R. Ashbee, *Town Planning Review* (April 1916), 233-39; and Frederick W. Coburn, "Public Parks in Kansas City," *Brush and Pencil* 13, no. 4 (January 1904): 288.

<sup>42</sup> Stacy Downs, "The Midwest Shirtwaist," *Kansas City Star* (July 4, 2004), D1-6; "A Midwest Shirtwaist, 2823 Harrison, Kansas City," all in "Architecture-Residential," Vertical File, MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>43</sup> Cindy Hoedel, "Colonnade Apartment Style is Well-Suited to Urban Living," *Kansas City Star* (June 6, 2004), D5; Cindy Hoedel, "The Colonnade: Apartment Style Ruled the Street For for Almost 30 Years," *Kansas City Star* (June 6, 2004), D1-6; in "Architecture-Residential," Vertical File, MVSC, KCPL; Holt, "A Foreign Tour at Home," 648.

Park, and Roanoke, and the look became popular for churches and schools as well.<sup>44</sup> These new neighborhoods housed a growing population that reflected not the motley amalgam of social flavors characteristic of a frontier city, but a substantial grounded populace whose lives had roots in Kansas City rather than on farmsteads or in eastern cities.<sup>45</sup>

This new sense of architectural and social coherence rested on an increasingly solid economic foundation. In 1914, Kansas City's boosters were successful in their campaign to convince the newly established Federal Reserve to locate one of its twelve Federal Reserve Banks in Kansas City—a decision that was largely based on the fact that Kansas City's immense trade territory contained nearly a fifth of the country's population and that its rail yards, industry, and wholesaling trade trailed only Chicago's.<sup>46</sup> Kansas City did not want a mere “branch bank,” claimed one of the boosters during the 1914 hearing, because it was “not a branch city.”<sup>47</sup> The Federal Reserve ultimately agreed, as did the many industries that began to construct factories in the growing industrial districts that expanded in the floodplains of the city's three primary rivers. Joining the established landscapes of the Central Industrial District were the North Kansas City district just across the Missouri River from downtown and numerous districts along the Blue River.<sup>48</sup>

And if industry had once seemed an anathema to urban grace, by 1914 there were efforts to suture the two landscapes together in ways that underlined the new metropolitan coherence. The Kansas City Manufacturing District, for instance, touted its connectivity to both the city's major rail corridors and the city's boulevards. While the “Kansas City Terminal Railway's tracks traverse the Kansas City Manufacturing District, affording direct connection with every railway” read a promotional map, “a city boulevard extends along the west side of the District connecting with every park and boulevard in Kansas City.”<sup>49</sup>

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Culminations often mark new beginnings, and if Union Station rose as a final flourish of the City Beautiful ideals of classical beauty and technological innovation, by the mid '20s it would face off with a structure announcing a much different flavor of progress. Jarvis Hunt and others had originally envisioned the area opposite the new station as a grand civic center comprised of monumental buildings arranged in a semicircular pattern, but a lack of leadership, fiscal limitations, and the psychological effects of World War I ultimately yielded a strikingly different fixture: an austere monument—in fact the nation's largest and most expensive—to the losses of the Great War.<sup>50</sup> (Figure 3)

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<sup>44</sup> George Ehrlich, *Kansas City, Missouri: An Architectural History, 1826-1992* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 63; James C. Massey and Shirley Maxwell, “Stone Houses That Say ‘Kansas City,’” *Old-House Journal* 21, no. 5 (September/October 1993): 20, 22.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Coleman, *The Kansas City Establishment: Leadership through Two Centuries in a Midwestern Metropolis* (Manhattan, KS: KS Publishing, 2006), 39-51.

<sup>46</sup> Tim Todd, *Confidence Restored: The History of the Tenth District's Federal Reserve Bank* (Kansas City, MO: The Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City, 2008), 30-31, 35-37.

<sup>47</sup> F. P. Neal, quoted in the *Kansas City Star*, cited in Todd, *Confidence Restored*, 36.

<sup>48</sup> John Q. Adams, “The North Kansas City Urban District,” *Economic Geography* 8, no. 4 (October 1932): 410.

<sup>49</sup> See “Kansas City Manufacturing District,” Map, SC 117, Series 4-2: Kansas City, Missouri-Business and Residential Districts #13, MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>50</sup> Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement*, 201-202; James R. Shortridge, *Kansas City and How It Grew, 1822-2011* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 70-71. From October 27 to November 5, 1919, the memorial fundraising campaign met its goal of collecting \$2 million. Ultimately it raised \$2,051,506.57 from more than 83,000 subscribers, or over a

Kansas City's Liberty Memorial was no mere monument, however. As the *American Stone Trade* pointed out, "while all the elements of arts, balance, proportion and appropriate ornamentation are present" in New Yorker Harold Van Buren Magonigle's design, "there is no slavish adherence to any school of the past."<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the axial symmetry of the overall plan, which featured a central, 217-foot obelisk, a flanking pair of temple-like buildings, and a massive retaining wall and frieze, was flavored by a new aesthetic grammar. The columns and roofline of the temples were sharp-edged. The two sphinxes guarding the foot of the obelisk were austere in their curving forms. And the obelisk itself—realized as a bundle of pillars that gave way to the shapes of four guardian angels whose wings supported a shallow cauldron designed to "float in the night sky"—was a primer in streamlined simplicity. Magonigle invoked the jamb figures of Chartres Cathedral in his description of the faintly gothic forms, but their slick proportions and geometrically rendered wings and faces seemed shaped not by the steady hands of masons, but by the cold calculus of a machine. More than guardians of the dead, these figures were also harbingers of the future.<sup>52</sup> "Perhaps it will be," the *American Stone Trade* correctly prophesied, "the first worthy model of the new American type that has been prophesied from time to time."<sup>53</sup> *Architecture* agreed, writing that Magonigle's design excelled in expressing "a new wholesome, vital tendency to get away from purely traditional forms and styles to make architecture more an expression of our own times, of American ideals, of the noble purposes the memorial commemorates."<sup>54</sup>

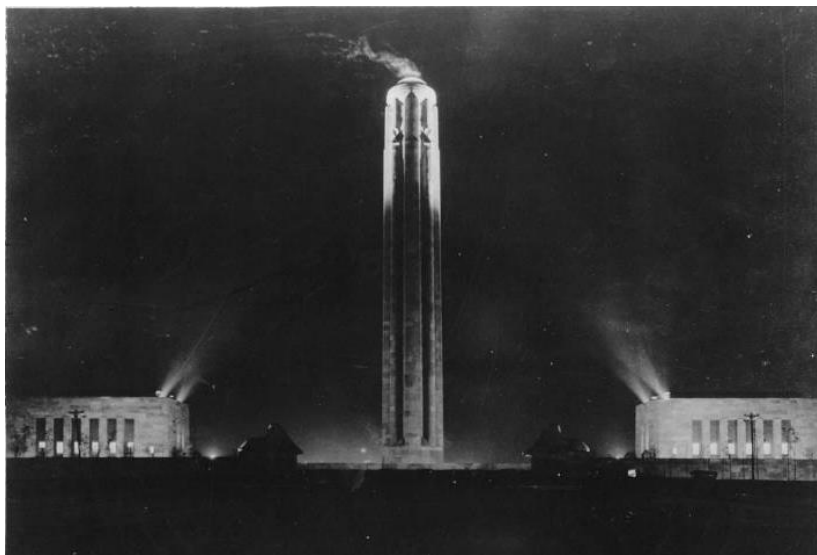


Figure 3: The Liberty Memorial in nocturnal illumination. Circa 1935.  
*General Collection, P1, Liberty Memorial, Number 18, MVSC, KCPL*

quarter of the city's population. See J. E. McPherson, *The Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri* (Kansas City: Liberty Memorial Association, 1929), 6.

<sup>51</sup> Fred K. Irvine, editor of *The American Stone Trade*, to J. E. McPherson, reprinted in the *Kansas City Star* (October 22, 1921); cited in Sarajane Sandusky Aber, "An Architectural History of the Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri, 1918-1935" (MA thesis, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 1988), 37.

<sup>52</sup> See McPherson, *The Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri*, 25; These figures made the Liberty Memorial one of the earliest anticipators of the style that would become known as Art Deco. See Patricia Bayer, *Art Deco Architecture: Design, Decoration and Detail from the Twenties and Thirties* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1992), 197.

<sup>53</sup> Fred K. Irvine to J. E. McPherson, reprinted in the *Kansas City Star* (October 22, 1921); cited in Aber, "An Architectural History of the Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri," 37.

<sup>54</sup> "The Liberty Memorial at Kansas City," *Architecture* 44 (August 1921): 241.

Those times, ideals, and purposes were nowhere as clear as they were in the cityscape that the Liberty Memorial overlooked. “Like a giant exclamation point set on a hill,” wrote a state official, “the new monument recorded “the upward groping of the human spirit in something more enduring than stockyards.”<sup>55</sup> Beginning in the early ‘20s, a new phase of urban energies began transforming Kansas City’s core into a place that would have been unrecognizable even to visitors arriving some ten years before. Taller skyscrapers punctuated the skyline, sprawling factories redefined industrial districts, new airfields traced former farmlands, and a new sense of productive energy and technological power redefined the feel of the city. Kansas City, in other words, was being reshaped by a new magnitude of machine-driven power whose effects were as present in industry as they were on downtown streets.

Yet if the productive and financial power of industrial machinery was underwriting the transformation of Interwar Kansas City, it was a peculiar development in the domain of political machinery that made Kansas City *sui generis* as an urban center. From 1925 onward, Tom Pendergast’s political machine galvanized its power to shape the urban core in ways that gave Kansas City’s modern edge a singular twist. Boss politics might have been under threat in many other American cities, but the tenacity and cunning of the Pendergast machine made for a city where office towers, factories, and other symbols of progress rubbed shoulders with an unmatched landscape of corruption, vice, and incendiary violence. Just as the Liberty Memorial offered a striking blend of old and new, the landscape of Kansas City’s core betrayed the reality that the new era of urban progress contained more than a whiff of old-fashioned grit. Above all, Kansas Citians were to learn that modernity was defined not by progress and concord, but by paradox, tension, and even rupture.

## ***New Heights***

When Shaemas O’Sheel profiled Kansas City in *The New Republic* in May 1928, he singled out the silhouette of its downtown as evidence of the city’s boundless energy. “[D]rive with me over the Inter-City Viaduct,” he wrote, and you will witness “an amazing skyline, comparable to Manhattan’s own, [which] catches the westering sun on a score of slender towers.”<sup>56</sup> O’Sheel’s comparison was certainly exaggerated, but its basis was clear. Positioned atop precipitous bluffs, downtown Kansas City seemed to rise above the prairie and its twisting rivers like a Medieval fortress. So too was the city’s “score of slender towers” impressive in its own right. In early 1929, Kansas City boasted sixty buildings rising between ten and twenty stories, and two—the twenty-story Federal Reserve Bank (1919) and the twenty-two-story Mark Twain Tower (1923)—reaching even higher. These buildings might not have been as tall as the iconic towers of Gotham or Chicago, but they still comprised a skyline that stood as America’s eighth tallest, an impressive statistic for America’s nineteenth-largest city.<sup>57</sup>

Between late 1929 and 1932, however, downtown Kansas City would come much closer to approximating O’Sheel’s hyperbole. “Millions are being poured into buildings in Kansas City,” boasted buildings commissioner William McMahan in 1929. “While other cities are talking business depression, Kansas City is carrying forward an epochal skyscraper building program.”<sup>58</sup> McMahan’s puffery was not without substance. The *Kansas City Star* had recently outlined a new arsenal of

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<sup>55</sup> Milligan, *Missouri Waltz*, 34.

<sup>56</sup> O’Sheel, “Kansas City,” 378.

<sup>57</sup> Reprinted in *Kansas City Star* (October 3, 1929).

<sup>58</sup> *Kansas City Times* (October 2, 1930), quoted in “The National Garage, Jackson County, Missouri,” National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet, United States Department of the Interior, § 8, 14.

buildings that would, as it put it, push downtown in a “vigorous stride ahead” through “the biggest building year in the history of that vital section of the city.” Three to four thousand craftsmen and an investment of fifteen to seventeen million dollars promised to produce a cluster of new hotels, parking garages, and most important, no less than six tall office buildings.<sup>59</sup>

As was the case in other cities, Kansas City’s vigorous stride would be as much about a revolution in aesthetics and scale as quantity. In the late 1920s, American skyscraper architecture underwent dramatic changes that saw the building form come of age as a reflection of new urban energies. “For a whole generation, from 1890 to 1920,” observed Lewis Mumford in 1928, “American [skyscraper] architecture was frozen: the face was dead.”<sup>60</sup> By 1930, that visage had come alive. Gone were the historicist details, weighty cornice lines, and truncated profiles of the first generation of tall buildings. In their place, slender, tapering towers with streamlined ornament and glamorous features were piercing the sky in America’s biggest cities, expressing a new set of urban values—a rejection of conservative precedent, an embrace of machines and technology, and an abiding faith in the centripetal economic and organizational energies of the city.<sup>61</sup> In the 1920s, downtown became a lifestyle as well as a place, and the new skyscrapers were the most ostentatious billboards for this new urban reality.

In Kansas City, five new buildings in particular would chronicle the city’s participation in this architectural transformation. These structures signaled its membership in a hierarchy of major cities—places with sufficient capital, zoning laws, professional expertise, and style to yield immense new buildings. Yet so too did they signal something more singular: they were expressions of a city that was cresting in its trajectory of financial, corporate, and professional power.

The transformation began not with a new structure, but with a striking addition to the fourteen-story Telephone Building, a Gothic revival structure at Eleventh and Oak Streets. Constructed in 1919 and designed by local firm Hoit, Price & Barnes, the Telephone Building signaled Kansas City’s prominent position within the expanding constellation of utility companies. In 1912, Kansas City had become a major node in the southwest’s telephone operations when its Missouri and Kansas Telephone Company became one of the four major Bell System firms that comprised the St. Louis-based Southwestern System. After the quasi-separate entities of the Southwestern System merged into the more monolithic Southwestern Bell Telephone Company in 1920, the Kansas City office quickly felt the pressures and effects of the newly centralized corporate power. By the end of the decade, further territorial expansion across Kansas and Missouri translated into plans to expand the Kansas City office personnel, as well as to consolidate the company’s Kansas City employees, who were by then working in various buildings. While executives opted for an expansion of the older building rather than a new one, a personnel increase of three hundred new executives, technical engineers, and others forced the revision of a six-story extension into one of fourteen—thereby doubling the building’s height to nearly four-hundred feet.<sup>62</sup>

This ambitious addition came in a bold architectural statement—one that transformed a simple building crowned with gothic pinnacles into the city’s first stepback skyscraper. Most of the

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<sup>59</sup> *Kansas City Star* (March 31, 1929; July 21, 1929).

<sup>60</sup> Lewis Mumford, “American Architecture Today: Part I: The Search for ‘Something More,’” *Architecture* (April 1928), reproduced in Roger Shepherd, editor, *Skyscraper: the Search for an American Style, 1891-1941* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), 245. There are, of course, exceptions, albeit ones that prove the rule; New York’s Woolworth Building stands as a major triumph of height in the skyscraper’s first age, just as Louis Sullivan’s terra cotta ornaments reflect an influential innovation in style.

<sup>61</sup> George H. Douglas, *Skyscrapers: A Social History of the Very Tall Building in America* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1996), 83-88; Gwendolyn Wright, *USA: Modern Architectures in History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 79-86.

<sup>62</sup> *Kansas City Star* (June 23, 1929).

city's existing skyscrapers, including the Telephone Building, had taken the form of the popular Palazzo style, the monolithic form in which a single building mass rose from a decorated base through a relatively unadorned shaft to an elaborate cap, which was often weighed down by substantial window decoration, hefty corbels, and an elaborate roofline.<sup>63</sup> Yet the Telephone Building addition—like the newest skyscrapers across the country designed in accordance with both zoning laws and new architectural tastes—rose in a series of tapering tiers, with dramatic setbacks marking the transition to progressively smaller footprints as the building rose up.<sup>64</sup> The new upper floors boasted three such setbacks, beveled corners, tall windows in the middle tier, and extensive gothic revival ornament in high relief that emphasized texture and loftiness. These elements drew the eye upwards to admire the top of a building that resembled some sort of gothic wedding cake—one whose roofline, at nearly four hundred feet above the sidewalk, crowned the tallest structure in the state of Missouri.<sup>65</sup>

If structures like the Telephone Building promised to push the look of downtown from an old to a new order, then this “striking contrast between the old and the new,” wrote the *Kansas City Star*, was nowhere as evident as it was at the intersection of Eleventh Street and Grand Boulevard. On that prominent corner, three new structures—the Professional Building, the National Garage, and the Bryant Building—constituted a “series of lofty terraces” that loomed over the busiest block of Petticoat Lane, the span of East Eleventh Street that served as Kansas City's primary retail thoroughfare and allegedly saw more than thirty-three thousand pedestrians per day.<sup>66</sup>

The Professional Building, a sixteen-story monolith of white Bedford stone and glazed terra cotta, was designed by Kansas City architect George McIntyre. Tall but not towering in height, the Professional Building was nonetheless remarkable for its full throated expression of a new, modernistic style. Uninterrupted, raised piers and depressed spandrels created an exaggerated sense of verticality—an effect further enhanced by ribbed spandrel panels and vertically clustered ornament in the building's upper stories.<sup>67</sup> And the ornament, in contrast with what architect Paul Cret called the “genuine antiques” that had decorated American skyscrapers before the mid-1920s—the “columns and cartouches, buttresses and ogives, battlements and gargoyles”—was of a new aesthetic order.<sup>68</sup> The main door pediments, lower spandrels, and crenelated roofline were embroidered with bold geometric shapes in low relief, with floral motifs, zigzags, chevrons, and sunbursts predominating—elements of a modernistic aesthetic program, famously initiated in the wake of the 1925 Decorative Arts Exposition of Paris, that would eventually be coined “Art Deco.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> See “Buildings: Office” Mounted Clippings File, MVSC, KCPL; George Ehrlich, *Kansas City, Missouri: An Architectural History, 1826-1990* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 58-61.

<sup>64</sup> See Douglas, *Skyscrapers*, 48-49; Benjamin Flowers, *Skyscraper: The Politics and Power of Building New York City in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 47-50; Carol Willis, “Zoning and ‘Zeitgeist’: The Skyscraper City in the 1920s,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 45 (March 1986): 47-59. It is significant as well that setback skyscrapers emulating those in New York became popular even in cities that did not have zoning laws requiring them.

<sup>65</sup> The setbacks of the Telephone Building were also necessary for purposes of weight distribution on the existing frame. See *Kansas City Star* (June 23, 1929).

<sup>66</sup> *Kansas City Star* (January 4, 1931), D1.

<sup>67</sup> The first demonstrable instance of this architectural emphasis on verticality was the plan for the Burnap Stationery and Printing Company Building at 1021 McGee Street, which, as one description read, would use “vertical lines . . . along the lines of recent New York structures.” See *Kansas City Journal Post* (March 30, 1924).

<sup>68</sup> Paul Phillipe Cret, “Ten Years of Modernism,” *Architectural Forum* 59 (August 1933): 91.

<sup>69</sup> The term “Art Deco” was not in contemporary use. It was only retroactively applied to the style in the 1960s during a revival of interest in the style. See Bayer, *Art Deco Architecture*, 12; Alastair Duncan, *Art Deco* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 180-181; Wright, *USA*, 85.

This fresh aesthetic boldness befit a newly emergent building use: the housing of physicians in a centralized location. “For years there has existed in Kansas City a widespread need for a building especially designed and equipped for the use of the [medical] professional,” explained the building prospectus. “The doctors and dentists are scattered all over the city and, in many cases, are working in buildings which do not provide modern facilities.”<sup>70</sup> These were justified anxieties. Specialized medical buildings had become *de rigueur* elements of a sophisticated urban landscape in major urban centers where the practice of medicine had migrated from homes to offices under the combined pressures of technological advancement, medical financing, and changing land markets. Centralized medical buildings gave doctors better access to more patients, and provided the necessary space for the emerging technologies that were transforming medicine from its homespun roots into a clinical practice. Downtown also conveyed an air of glamorous professionalism to physicians, many of whom were keen to see themselves as members of a business-scientific elite. Builder Charles A. Smith doubtless was aware of these needs among Kansas City’s medical establishment when he opted to place the city’s new medical building on a corner of downtown’s most frequented intersection.<sup>71</sup>

The Professional Building’s aesthetic boldness and modern functionality doubtless received a boost from the neighboring National Garage, also designed by McIntyre. Featuring a red-brick façade traced with cream terra cotta that made it blend in with existing buildings in the area, the National Garage was nonetheless of a modern order of function and design. Uninterrupted piers and bold geometric shapes traced the building, and the interior expressed the newest in parking garage layouts. Pulling into the structure underneath a sign reading “Garage” in Art Deco script, motorists could either hand off their car to an attendant or park it themselves—an experience made easier by the “clearway ramp system,” a design by Detroit-based engineer John L. Woolfenden that meant that ascending and descending cars would not cross paths.<sup>72</sup> Downtown Kansas City’s newest and largest parking deck was also attached to the Professional Building via an underground walkway—a flourish of convenience and comfort that many motorists had come to expect in a downtown increasingly designed for automobile access.

The most prominent component of the “magic change” that was transforming the intersection was the Bryant Building, a twenty-six story tower designed by the storied Chicago firm Graham, Anderson, Probst, & White. The building was the vision not of a corporation or professional builder, but a wealthy landowning family who had long maintained a seven-story office building on the plot they had acquired from a family marriage in the 1880s. The flush times of the late ‘20s had prompted Hughes Bryant, the family’s most ardent entrepreneur, to evict the former tenants, raze the old building, and replace it with a new modern tower that would churn out larger returns.<sup>73</sup>

Built at breakneck speed in less than six months between May and November 1930, the Bryant Building shoved the architectural vocabulary of downtown Kansas City into the new era.<sup>74</sup> If the Telephone Building extension had tempered its modern loftiness with conservative ornamentation

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<sup>70</sup> *The Professional Building*, (Missouri: Stuebaker Securities Co., 1929), 3, quoted in “The Professional Building,” National Register of Historic Places Inventory—Nomination Form, United States Department of the Interior, § 8, 1.

<sup>71</sup> See George Rosen, *The Structure of American Medical Practice, 1875-1941* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 25-32, 53-60; James A. Schafer, *The Business of Private Medical Practice: Doctors, Specialization, and Urban Change in Philadelphia, 1900-1940* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 150-155; Neil Larry Shumsky, James Bohland, and Paul Knox, “Separating Doctors’ Homes and Doctors’ Offices: San Francisco, 1881-1941,” *Social Science & Medicine* 23, no. 10 (1986): 1052-1057.

<sup>72</sup> “National Garage,” National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet, United States Department of the Interior, § 8, 12.

<sup>73</sup> *Kansas City Star* (August 8, 1939).

<sup>74</sup> *Kansas City Star* (November 2, 1930).

(and was thus what Lewis Mumford called a “transitional example between Eclectic practice and a clean-cut honest Modernism”) and the Professional Building was merely the old Palazzo format traced with a new stylistic vocabulary, the Bryant Building exemplified the full range of the newest in stepback skyscraper design: historical details were minimized or discarded, ornamentations were flattened, setbacks were deepened, and vertical features triumphed over horizontal lines. The result was an archetype of what critic Sheldon Cheney called “stripped architecture,” a format of “new stark skyscraper” that exemplified the mood of the late 1920s with its “clean-machine sharp lines.”<sup>75</sup>



Figure 4: The retail stretch of East Eleventh Street known as “Petticoat Lane” welcomed the looming presence of the Bryant Building (right middle ground) and the extended Telephone Building (left background) at the 1920s drew to a close.

*General Photograph Collection, P1, Streets, No. 5, MVSC, KCPL*

Allegedly designed as a miniature version of Eliel Saarinen’s acclaimed yet unbuilt second-place entry for the 1922 Chicago Tribune Tower competition, the Bryant more closely approximated structures like Raymond Hood’s iconic New York Daily News Building, whose striking vertical striations called to mind the slick lines of modern machinery. The Bryant’s facade featured alternating glazed-brick piers in white and recessed spandrels in dark brown terra cotta—a chromatic arrangement that yielded a pattern of stripes that seemed to race skyward. Beveled capstones atop each pier at the setbacks added the final touch of streamlining, yielding a facade that called to mind the elongated ribs of a radiator. Modern and elegant treatments at street level included polished brass entryways and Art

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<sup>75</sup> Sheldon Cheney, *The New World Architecture* (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1930), 144, 154.



Deco ornament—features in striking contrast to the heavy piers and stone arches of the colonnade of Emery, Bird, Thayer, Kansas City’s Gilded Age department store that now found itself sharing the city’s most prominent shopping corner with the architecture of the future. (Figure 4)

For all the Bryant Building’s sleekness, two subsequent skyscrapers—both designed by Hoyt, Price & Barnes—pushed the skyline to its highest points of altitude and innovation. The thirty-five story Fidelity Building, built by the Fidelity Bank and Trust at Ninth and Walnut Streets, was the city’s consummate monument to institutional finance. Having won one of the nation’s twelve Federal Reserve Banks in 1914, Kansas City ascended in the country’s financial hierarchy, and amassed something of a banking district in the area around the Federal Reserve Building at Ninth and Grand. By 1929, forty-one national and state banks and sixty-three building and loan associations were clustered in an area bounded by Ninth Street, Grand Boulevard, Baltimore Street, and Tenth Street.<sup>76</sup> Fidelity, one of the largest, was the net result of a 1919 merger of the National Bank of Kansas City and the Fidelity Trust Company, as well as the subsequent absorption of the New England National Bank and Trust Company, the Western Exchange Bank, and the Liberty National Bank.<sup>77</sup> This expansion quickly translated into the need for a far larger building, and by the late 1920s, it was clear that banks too were taking part in the speculative frenzy that was a major factor in the skyscraper boom.

Comprised of a grand, four-story base for banking activities and a soaring, thirty-story tower of leasable office space, Fidelity’s new building rose above the conservative structures of the other financial institutions as an example of the newly emergent “skyscraper bank.” With swelling assets and inflated appetites for speculative real estate income, commercial banks across America had begun to integrate banking quarters with the speculative office tower, allowing them to express a modern and commanding sense of monumentality while engaging in the potentially lucrative real estate market.<sup>78</sup>

Innovative form aside, the Fidelity Building’s four-story base also expressed the newest flavor of classical design. While bank architecture had long veered towards grand classicism, and included features that expressed an appearance of excess wealth and solid conservatism that were critical to winning the trust of depositors, the modern edge of the -20s saw architects streamline the most conservative of America’s building types.<sup>79</sup> “It now appears that columns are not necessary at all,” wrote one critic about the newly pared-down look. “[A] bank can look dignified and impressive entirely by virtue of fine proportions and an essentially modern sophistication in detail—or absence of it.”<sup>80</sup> The logic of that sophistication, wrote proponent Paul Phillippe Cret, was rooted in “the casting overboard of most of our ornamental system” in favor of “the flat rectangle.”<sup>81</sup>

This geometric maxim was the guiding hand for Hoyt, Price & Barnes’ design for the Fidelity building, which espoused the clean edges of the “new classicism.” The trademark filigree of Beaux Arts classicism was not gone, but rather contained and circumscribed by a series of crisp lines and

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<sup>76</sup> Roy Ellis, *A Civic History of Kansas City, Missouri* (Springfield, MO: Elkins-Swyers Co., 1930), 41; “Fidelity National Bank and Trust Company Building,” National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet, United States Department of the Interior, § 8, 3. These 104 institutions had resources of \$369,986,430.

<sup>77</sup> After this primary merger, three additional banks—the New England National Bank and Trust Company, the Western Exchange Bank, and the Liberty National Bank—were absorbed into Fidelity. See “Historical,” *The Fidelity Spirit* (February 1932): 6; “The Spirit of Fidelity,” *Kansas Citizen* 21 (February 9, 1932): 5, 11; *Kansas City Star* (March 6, 1930), 1.

<sup>78</sup> Charles Belfoure, *Monuments to Money: The Architecture of American Banks* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2005), 222-227; Goldberg, *America in the Twenties*, 131-132. Between 1922 and 1929, GNP had an annual increase of 4.7 percent. See Belfoure, 213.

<sup>79</sup> Belfoure, *Monuments to Money*, 5-6, passim.

<sup>80</sup> Matlock Price, “National City Bank of New York,” *Architectural Record* (May 1928), quoted in Belfoure, *Monuments to Money*, 214.

<sup>81</sup> Cret, “Ten Years of Modernism,” 92.

borders. On the facade, grandeur was achieved not through ornate columns, but through seven fluted pilasters that framed tall, recessed windows on their way towards a commanding but simple entablature inscribed with the institution's name and punctuated with officious medallions and a simple laurel wreath. Florid ornament was restricted to low-relief spandrels and restrained decoration framing the three entrance doors. The effect was a boxier, clean-limbed classicism that—much like Magonigle's Liberty Memorial—seemed forged not by human hands, but by the calculated power of a machine.

Inside, customers beheld a more apparent negotiation between opulence and austerity. Walking up the marble staircase to the main banking area, patrons entered a space characterized by the finest materials. The two-story hall featured bronze check desks, dentilled cornices, and soaring piers topped with Corinthian and Ionic capitals. Ornate friezes and panels were embroidered with floral motifs, scrolls, and medallions. The colors of the elaborate friezes—each embroidered with floral motifs, scrolls, and medallions—were echoed in both the ceiling and floor. The latter was patterned in triangular slabs of Tennessee marble; black, gray, cream, and coral dominated, splashed with accents of blue, green, and gold.<sup>82</sup> Ornate bronze grilles marked the entrance to the safe deposit quarters as well as the main lobby entrance to the elevator lobby. The Director's room—a focal point in most commercial banks—was traced with black marble floors, black walnut walls, and an ornate ceiling of ornamental plaster.

Yet as on the façade, the interior opulence was streamlined with clean edges. The building prospectus emphasized that the space would be “of the spirit of Classic, [yet] reflect the modern influence of today.”<sup>83</sup> Piers were rendered not as fluted cylinders, but as rectilinear forms faced with planes of marble. Elevator doors themselves were florid, but the detail was in low relief and the surroundings were clean lined. In the main banking area, cylindrical light fixtures of bronze and glass hung like talismans of the future. And as was the case in many of the nation's new skyscrapers, the office spaces and common areas inside the tower were decidedly less ornate, and even approached a Spartan appearance. Art Deco buildings, after all, according to a historian, were concerned with “inherent yet overt qualities and of their spirit, energy and immediate visual impact, not of their internal structures, services, floor plans, and front and side elevations.”<sup>84</sup>

The building's most ostentatious feature was its height, and the thirty-story tower that soared out of the top of the monumental base was a calculated expression of sheer mass and modernistic ornament. The trademark vertical striations of sunken spandrels and windows gave the building lift, but setbacks were limited to two in the upper stories, resulting in a building that did not compensate a sense of grandeur for loftiness. The design also ensured that square footages in the upper stories remained substantial, thereby maximizing rental income potential.<sup>85</sup> Art Deco ornament along the parapets framed the building's focal point—a duo of short clock towers topped with hipped copper roofs. This architectural flourish alluded to the bank's original Romanesque building, which boasted similar towers and gave the bank its homespun motto: “Under the old town clock.” Now some four-hundred and fifty feet above the sidewalk, Fidelity's trademark timepieces had been reimaged in

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<sup>82</sup> Hoit, Price & Barnes, “Description of Main Banking Room and Executive Offices of Fidelity Bank Building,” *The Fidelity Spirit* (February 1932): 13; These descriptions of the interior and exterior of the Fidelity Building were also published, verbatim, in in *Kansas Citian* 21 (February 9, 1932): 6-9, 10; “Fidelity National Bank and Trust Company Building,” National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet, United States Department of the Interior, § 7, 8.

<sup>83</sup> Hoit, Price & Barnes, “Description of Main Banking Room and Executive Offices of Fidelity Bank Building,” 13.

<sup>84</sup> Bayer, *Art Deco Architecture*, 12.

<sup>85</sup> As Carol Willis writes, skyscrapers had always balanced factors of economic returns and architectural expression. See *Form Follows Finance: Skyscrapers and Skylines in New York and Chicago* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1995), 15.

modernistic splendor—a reality captured by a gleaming image of the building that appeared in a prominent ad in *Fortune* in 1931.<sup>86</sup>

As impressive as the Fidelity Building was, the thirty-story Kansas City Power and Light Building was Kansas City's most fully realized Jazz Age skyscraper—the one that valorized Ada Louise Huxtable's contemporary assertion that Art Deco architecture “took [structural] technology for granted and embroidered the result.”<sup>87</sup> (Figure 5) Built in 1932 at the corner of Fourteenth Street and Baltimore Avenue, the Power and Light Building boasted a dramatically telescoping form with six setbacks, the trademark vertical striations of modernistic style, a cohesive program of modernistic ornament, and a crowning, six-story finial capped with a cupola of prismatic glass. As befit the most vertically emphasized building in the skyline, the Power and Light Building was also the tallest. Topping out at 479 feet above the sidewalk, it was the highest not only in Kansas City, but in the state of Missouri.<sup>88</sup>



Figure 5: The Kansas City Power and Light Building in 1935.  
*Robert Askren Photograph Collection, P35, Box 2, Folder 10, No. 4, MVSC, KCPL*

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<sup>86</sup> See *Fortune* (May 1931), 26.

<sup>87</sup> Ada Louise Huxtable, “Skyscraper Art Rides High,” *New York Times* (November 17, 1974), reprinted in *On Architecture: Collected Reflections on A Century of Change* (New York: Walker & Company, 2008), 140.

<sup>88</sup> The Power and Light Building would remain Kansas City's tallest building until 1980, when the 504-foot-tall Hyatt Regency Hotel (now Sheraton) was completed at Crown Center just south of downtown.

It was fitting that Kansas City's tallest building housed the company headquarters of one of the most transformative industries of the era. During the 1920s, electric utility expansion altered the daily lives of Americans more than any innovation save for the automobile; in the number of kilowatt hours, energy use doubled for commercial and industrial sectors, and quadrupled in the residential domain, with some sixteen million households (and sixty-three percent of the population) wired.<sup>89</sup> In homes and offices, bright, reliable tungsten bulbs replaced the dim and dangerous glow of gas lighting, and in factories, electricity permitted the efficient "straight-line" system of production involving a conveyor belt, which led to increased efficiency and outputs along with lower production costs. These newly wired factories could more effectively churn out an expanded array of electrical appliances and devices that were being increasingly offered to and demanded by consumers living in newly built "electric homes" for the middle and upper-middle classes. While new "electric servants" like refrigerators, washing machines, and vacuum cleaners transformed the domestic experience of women, devices like razors, percolators, and clocks saw electricity give cadence to the daily routines of the household.

This revolution in technology had led the Kansas City Power and Light Company (KCPL) out of a period of turbulent affiliations and instability to one of growth and promise. By the early 1920s, KCPL had assembled a modern management team, set goals for expansion and modernization, built their own power station, and established themselves as a major hub for major electric power transmission—key for a city where electric energy consumption increased by 52 percent between 1922 and 1928. The company's output quadrupled from 175 million kilowatt hours in 1920 to 647 million in 1930.<sup>90</sup> This boom in business catalyzed new efforts to double down on corporate power and coordination, and KCPL invested heavily in employee education programs designed to maximize coordination between the growing power company, the city, and its residents.<sup>91</sup> By the end of the decade, the company's management also aimed to build a single building that could not only house all employees under one roof, but also trumpet the company's image to a metropolitan market.<sup>92</sup>

The newly valorized power company could not have wished for a better assemblage of symbolic and architectural features. Hoit, Price, & Barnes' design was the city's most elaborate expression of both functionality and glamour, and contained in its thirty stories every element a company could hope to have to streamline their processes, retain their employees, and market and sell their utilities and products. Twenty-six floors of offices were accompanied by a gymnasium, doctors' offices, and an auditorium, and, of course, a grand lobby. High-speed elevators, the latest in ventilation systems, and the most complete pressured tube system west of Chicago—a network of a hundred terminal stations and five miles of tubing that whisked memos, contracts, and invoices between floors—ensured an efficient and comfortable work experience.<sup>93</sup> And like many structures that were increasingly sensitive to the growing consumer economy of the 1920s, the Power and Light Building included space for showcasing and selling its new products; a series of second-floor showrooms featured a full array of the company's expanding range of electric appliances.

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<sup>89</sup> Parrish, *Anxious Decades*, 34; Mark H. Rose, *Cities of Light and Heat: Domesticating Gas and Electricity in Urban America* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 151.

<sup>90</sup> Rose, *Cities of Light and Heat*, 151-152.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 152-156.

<sup>92</sup> Ellis, *A Civic History of Kansas City, Missouri*, 119-120; Sherry Lamb Schirmer and Richard D. McKinzie, *At the River's Bend: An Illustrated History of Kansas City, Independence, and Jackson County* (Woodland Hills, CA: Windsor Publications, Inc., in Association with the Jackson County Historical Society, 1982), 311.

<sup>93</sup> "Tube System Most Complete One West of Chicago; Five Miles Long," *The Tie* (u.d.), 16, in "Kansas City Power and Light Company," Vertical File, Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library.

Function aside, the Power and Light Building was first and foremost a hymn to Art Deco style, and its aesthetic success hinged significantly on the fact that one of the style's most enduring symbols—energy—stood for the very product the company was selling. Inside and out, the sunburst was the building's prevailing leitmotif, and was rendered in plaster and aluminum, terra cotta and marble. It adorned everything from the pediments and wrought iron awnings above the main entrances to the ceiling beams, piers, and balustrades in the lobby to the building's lower spandrels and the parapet finials that crowned each setback. In the ground-floor elevator area, sunburst patterns adorned the marble floor, the polished elevator doors and their crowning pediments, the radiator grill, and even the letterbox—buttressing Ada Louis Huxtable's assertion the spirit of Art Deco turned the elevator lobby into a twentieth-century art form.<sup>94</sup> On each side of the building's finial, a bas-relief sunburst crowned slender windows whose panes were arranged to echo emanating rays of light.

The stylistic trump card, however, was the building's nocturnal illumination. In the electric revolution of the 1920s, lighting had become a key element of the decade's new architectural arsenal, whose setback forms offered an ideal geometry for upward oriented illumination that accentuated height and transformed buildings in what Raymond Hood in 1930 called "architecture of the night."<sup>95</sup> In Kansas City, both the Bryant and Telephone Buildings boasted illumination in their upper setbacks. Yet for the city's newly valorized power company, light was not merely an architectural accent, but a literal showcase of the company's product. The *Kansas City Star* had reported that this illumination would mean that "no crevice of shadow will break the gleaming surface," and it was right. After dark, a battery of 434 floodlights turned the limestone facade of Kansas City's tallest building into a "pillar of brilliance" that stood out against the night sky. Designers placed rows of floodlights not only behind the building's six setbacks, but also along the base of the building, where they showered light upwards in beams that echoed the sunburst motifs that adorned the stone and ironwork around the main entrances. Early publicity boasted that this lighting program consumed enough power to supply a community of six thousand people.<sup>96</sup>

The main event of the illumination program was, appropriately, featured at the building's apex. On Friday and Saturday nights, two sets of colored lights—one flooding the outside of the finial and another housed behind the beveled glass windows of the finial itself—engaged in a staggered oscillation of white, green, ruby and amber light, rendering the pinnacle of Kansas City's tallest building "a grotesque jewel" that seemed to sparkle in the night sky. The "cynosure of neighboring eyes," the kaleidoscopic pinnacle and white shaft of the Power and Light Building could be seen from upland locations in "at least four or five Missouri and Kansas counties."<sup>97</sup> As one commentator pointed out, "planes approaching from St. Louis can see this beacon from a distance of seventy-five miles."<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Huxtable, "Skyscraper Art Rides High," in *On Architecture*, 141.

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Dietrich Neumann, "Introduction," in *Architecture of the Night: The Illuminated Building*, ed. Dietrich Neumann (Munich: Prestel, 2002), 6. See also See John A. Jakle, *City Lights: Illuminating the American Night* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

<sup>96</sup> *Kansas City Star* (August 23, 1931), 1.

<sup>97</sup> "Highest Man Made Point in Missouri," *The Udylyte News* 4 (January 1932): 1, in "Kansas City Power and Light Company," Vertical File, MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>98</sup> Giles Carroll Mitchell, *There Is No Limit: Architecture and Sculpture in Kansas City* (Kansas City: Brown-White Company, 1934), 96. Mitchell's book, "dedicated to Hoit, Price & Barnes, who furnished the architectural services for the three loftiest buildings in Missouri," expresses the blind faith in the power of Kansas City's architectural advancement more acutely than any other volume.

Two journalists would write in the 1950s that 1933 marked the year when Kansas City completed a commanding skyline that would define it at a glance.<sup>99</sup> They were right. With three buildings exceeding four hundred feet, and one of the most lavish specimens of Art Deco architecture in the country, America's thirteenth largest city punched far above its weight in the skyscraper revolution of the Jazz Age. Its was a more impressive lineup than most of the other major centers of the mid-, south-, and far-west, including Los Angeles, Denver, Dallas, San Francisco, and Minneapolis. Save for the architectural command centers of Chicago and New York, only cities like the industrial powerhouse of Detroit could boast as impressive of a collection of new structures. Kansas Citians were especially quick to point out that the state's other major city—and indeed the seventh largest in America—could not come close to matching its smaller rival's architectural dominance: "St. Louis has many imposing buildings," gloated the *Kansas City Star*, "but the four tallest buildings in Missouri are in Kansas City."<sup>100</sup> And it is no wonder that for many, this "sweeping revision of the city's skyline" gave Kansas City, for the first time, a look of genuine urban energy: "[C]oming north over the brow of the Main street hill at Thirtieth street," wrote a local paper, "a long line of light stretched away to the north, the varied outline of buildings stood out against the night sky, and the whole picture gave you a sense of the restless, growing strength, the young magnificence and power and the very genuine beauty that is Kansas City's."<sup>101</sup>

As in most cities, Kansas City's real estate industry felt the impact of the Depression, and the city quickly learned that the self-righteous tone expressed by Commissioner McMahon in 1929 was premature. By 1933, Fidelity Bank had been liquidated, and the monumental building etched with its name consequently fell into the hands of others. The Bryant family met a similar, if quicker, fate. The Depression swiftly erased the family's assets in both money and land, and the family's new building—backed by a \$1.75 million loan issued during the onset of the Depression—never raked in enough to pay its nominal family a dime.<sup>102</sup> A fitting symbol of the financially hollowing out of the most conspicuous age in American history was the copper box encased in the building's cornerstone. Filled with contemporary objects meant to venerate the building's construction, it held more in commemorative pennies than the family would ever see from the modern building that bore their name.<sup>103</sup>

### *The Specter of Industry*

New skyscrapers were not the only evidence of central Kansas City's ramped-up sophistication and economic maturation in the wake of World War I. The city's industrial districts housed equally arresting expressions of the city's financial and productive power. Since the 1870s and '80s, Kansas City's original industrial developments had focused on meat packing and grain processing—activities that had had filled the floodplains of the Kansas, Missouri, and Blue Rivers with industrial, residential, and commercial districts backed by Eastern and English finance capital. By 1900, districts like Argentine, Armourdale, and Rosedale in Kansas City, Kansas, and Manchester, Sheffield, and Leeds in Missouri were humming with activity, as was the ever-busy wholesaling-oriented Central Industrial District of the West Bottoms at the foot of the downtown bluffs. And the plants in these areas not

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<sup>99</sup> Haskell and Fowler, *City of the Future*, 132.

<sup>100</sup> *Kansas City Star* (July 15, 1937).

<sup>101</sup> *Kansas City Star* (March 27, 1932), "Civic Pride," *Future* 1 (March 29, 1935): 4.

<sup>102</sup> *Kansas City Star* (August 8, 1939).

<sup>103</sup> *Kansas City Star* (August 8, 1930).

only packaged meat and milled grain. They also smelted silver, forged steel, refined oil, and produced soap from the tallow left over from the packing plants.<sup>104</sup>

The 1920s, however, ushered in a new era of heavy industry that pulled in more investment and yielded a more diverse array of goods. World War I had depressed many urban economies, but Kansas City's boomed from the demands of wartime food production, which demanded railcar after railcar of the hard red winter wheat grown on the Kansas plains that was a commodity exclusive to the Kansas City Board of Trade.<sup>105</sup> This activity ensured that the gears of Kansas City's processing plants were revving in high gear and that the city's connectivity to the rest of the country was persistently on display. It was no wonder that industrialists, wholesalers, and distributors had their eyes on the city for further development as a production center for the postwar economy and as a regional hub for the urbanizing Southwest.<sup>106</sup> Indeed, in the five years following the Armistice, 918 new industrial concerns were established in Kansas City, accounting for an employment increase of 4,000 men and women.<sup>107</sup>

These concerns transformed Kansas City into a major point of production for the new array of consumer goods that its metropolitan and hinterland markets were demanding as part of the era of mounting American prosperity. If people of "[t]he East," wrote two local journalists in 1950, "couldn't believe that anything good could come out of the cow town except flour and steaks," then by the end of the 1920s that attitude had changed.<sup>108</sup> By 1928, the city's factories produced seventy percent more goods than they had seven years earlier, putting industrial growth in Kansas City well above the national average. The trifecta of rising mass production, technological advancements, and labor efficiency that yielded production gains of 60 percent in the American economy (far outpacing the population increase) was felt acutely in Kansas City, as was the rise a swelling class of consumers with access not only to growing paychecks, by the all-powerful new tool of installment buying.<sup>109</sup> By the late 1920s, Kansas City's factories were not only churning out immense amounts of new food products. They were also forging impressive amounts of steel, assembling more automobiles than any other city outside of Detroit, and sharing industrial landscapes with new airfields that were helping Kansas City become a hub of the skies as well as the rails. When the Chamber of Commerce kickstarted an Industrial Expansion Program in 1927 that sought to capitalize on recent growth for an even more expansive manufacturing footprint, a prominent industrial engineer claimed that the research survey conducted as part of this program was the largest and most complete of any city in the country.<sup>110</sup>

The primary distribution hub of the Southwest saw its most striking growth in the construction, food product, and clothing industries. By 1927, the city's paint and varnish industry had reached sixth place in the nation, and wood product manufacturing and processing had drawn local capital investments of \$15 million. Foundry product values rose from \$5.3 million in 1919 to \$13.2 million a decade later, with values of structural and ornamental iron doubling to \$1.9 million. The

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<sup>104</sup> Shortridge, *Kansas City and How it Grew*, 37-44; William S. Worley, *Development of Industrial Districts in the Kansas City Region: From the Close of the Civil War to World War II* (Kansas City, MO: Midwest Research Institute, 1993), 3-11.

<sup>105</sup> Worley, *Development of Industrial Districts in the Kansas City Region*, 6; "The Exchanges of Minneapolis, Duluth, Kansas City, Mo., Omaha, Buffalo, Philadelphia, Milwaukee and Toledo," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 38, no. 2 (September 1911): 237-241; W. E. Grimes, "Trends in the Agriculture of the Hard Winter Wheat Belt," *The Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics* 4, no. 4 (November 1928): 347.

<sup>106</sup> Haskell and Fowler, *City of the Future*, 128; Shortridge, *Kansas City and How It Grew*, 74-75.

<sup>107</sup> *Kansas City Star* (June 24, 1923); in "Industry," Mounted Clippings File (1900-1949), MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>108</sup> Haskell and Fowler, *City of the Future*, 129.

<sup>109</sup> Goldberg, *America in the Twenties*, 84.

<sup>110</sup> *Kansas City Star* (May 1, 1927; July 1, 1927).

city's food industries expanded even more dramatically. In 1925, the *Kansas City Journal-Post* announced that Kansas City had finally matched the outputs of the flour mill powerhouses of Minneapolis and Buffalo. Its massive, wheat-growing hinterland spanning the entirety of Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma produced enough grain for a total of 28,000,000 barrels of flour in 1925.<sup>111</sup> From 1919 to 1929, the city's confectionary industry grew nearly 500 percent, with product values rising from \$1 million to \$5.4 million between 1919 and 1929, with an equally striking growth in wage earners—from 191 workers to 847. The production of butter, coffee, spices, ice cream, and bakery products skyrocketed, with the total product value rising from \$33.6 million in 1919 to \$46.6 million in 1929. The city's most dramatic growth, however, was in the ready-to-wear garment industry, whose outputs rose from \$1.7 million in 1921 to over \$8 million in 1929.<sup>112</sup>

The profits and goods generated by these sectors and their auxiliary industries funneled into the pockets and homes of an increasingly prosperous urban population.<sup>113</sup> Kansas Citians were, for the most part, substantially better paid, better supplied, and better housed than they had been a decade before, and it was no mystery as to where much of the material output of the city's factories was going. And while a rising living standard was characteristic of most American cities at the time, Kansas City's was especially striking. As one Chamber of Commerce report boasted in 1928, "in the period 1923 to 1925 Kansas City showed a greater growth in wage earners employed, amounts paid in wages, and value of products than was shown by any other city which can be considered in direct regional competition with Kansas City."<sup>114</sup> In these boom years, Kansas City registered a 17 percent gain in the value of its products, while Cincinnati, Chicago, and Minneapolis experienced gains of only 5, 7, and 1 percent, respectively. Factory production numbers from 1925 totaled just over \$590 million, putting Kansas City ahead of Milwaukee and nearly on par with the industrial powerhouse of Pittsburgh. Between 1921 and 1929, the number of industries that employed more than 500 wage earners grew from nine to twenty-five, and the city's factory employment figures increased by 88 percent—well above the national average.<sup>115</sup>

For palpable evidence of these statistics, one had to look no further than the industrial landscapes themselves. In 1926, when the *Kansas City Journal-Post* sponsored an essay contest highlighting the "Industrial Advantages of Greater Kansas City and Its Future Possibilities," the prompts were organized around the relative strengths of the city's twelve "different and distinctive industrial districts," each of which, it was implied, was integral to the city's status as the hub of the "industrial Southwest."<sup>116</sup> The framing was apt. Physically and symbolically expanded during the mid-to-late 1920s (and in some cases into the early 1930s), the industrial districts that traced the perimeter of Kansas City's core showcased the city's membership in a new economy of modernity—one where the efficient, electrically-powered factory, the constant output of new consumer goods, and the specter of revolutionary transportation modes signaled a new urban age.

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<sup>111</sup> *Kansas City Journal-Post* (May 3, 1926).

<sup>112</sup> Jeannette Terrell and Patricia Zimmer, *The Economic Base of Greater Kansas City*. Prepared for the Economic Research Department of the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City (September 1949), (Section III), 89-91; a bound draft of this unpublished manuscript is housed in the collection of SHSMO, KC.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 103–112.

<sup>114</sup> *Greater Kansas City Industrial Data Handbook*, (Kansas City, MO: Industrial and Publicity Department, Chamber of Commerce, August 1928), 4; cited in *ibid.*, 78.

<sup>115</sup> *Kansas Citian*, September 10, 1929, 91; cited in Terrell and Zimmer, *The Economic Base of Greater Kansas City*, 78; Richard P. Coleman and Bernice L. Neugarten, *Social Status in the City* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1971), 294; Haskell and Fowler, *City of the Future*, 128.

<sup>116</sup> *Kansas City Journal-Post* (February 8, 1926; February 15, 1926; February 22, 1926; March 4, 1926; March 8, 1926; March 20, 1926; March 22, 1926; April 5, 1926; April 12, 1926); in "Industrial Development—Contest," Mounted Clippings File (1900-1949), MVSC, KCPL.



One of the most dramatic areas of development was the Blue River Valley, an area of several adjacent districts that traced the eastern perimeter of the city along the floodplain of its eponymous waterway. While the factories that dotted these districts churned out a diverse array of products prior to the 1920s boom, the decade ushered in a new degree of industrial investment and production.

A good illustration of the increased activity surrounded the explosive growth of the Kansas City Bolt and Nut Company, established as the first factory in the area in 1887. By 1919, new local interests had gained control over the thirty-year-old company and announced a \$1,250,000 expansion that would result in a steel mill of unprecedented size and output in the Missouri River Valley—key for gaining a regional advantage over Eastern competitors. By 1925, a series of major capital investments had grown the company by a factor of twenty, and the original factory had been expanded into a massive industrial complex that sprawled along the curve of the Blue River. That year, the company was reorganized as the Sheffield Steel Corporation, an entity that became, in less than five years, “the department store of the steel industry” for the unparalleled diversity of its product line. This output caught the eye of the Ohio-based American Rolling Mill Company (later rebranded as AMOCO Steel Corporation), which acquired the plant in 1930.<sup>117</sup> What had been little more than a parochial parts factory had, in little more than ten years, become a major production point in the American steel industry.

The most transformative industry in the Blue River Valley, however, was automobile manufacturing. Cars were, of course, the iconic object of the Interwar era—one that signaled not only the transformation of lifestyles, but also the processes of industrial production and business development. No sector had ever sought such elevated control over both the machines of industry as well as the consumer market they were targeting, a reality that made it no surprise when the automobile industry proved to accelerate economic growth at an unprecedented rate and succeeded at overtaking railroads as the nation’s largest industry during the 1920s.<sup>118</sup>

The automobile industry had taken hold in Kansas City in 1912, when Henry Ford opened his first assembly plant outside of Detroit in the Sheffield district at the extreme eastern end of Twelfth Street. Advocated by industrial architect Albert Kahn, the plant allowed Ford to avoid the high freight charges of shipping fully assembled cars by putting the final point of assembly in the West’s most important railroad center.<sup>119</sup> And while Kansas City’s trunk line railways gave Ford easy access to growing western markets, the city itself was also thirsty for automobile ownership; in 1912, Kansas City’s car sales rates were the third highest in the country after New York and Chicago, and the city boasted numerous small car companies intent on supply an increasingly car-crazed city.<sup>120</sup>

Yet the real thrust came in 1923, when the company announced a major expansion of the Sheffield factory—one that would not only ramp up Kansas City’s automobile production, but also cement its position as a lead city of America’s most transformative industry. The 176,000 square foot addition brought the total square footage of the plant to 410,000, and took shape as an 839-foot-long, one story building that allowed for the latest in modern production methods. (Figure 6) Inside, a 750-foot long continuous conveyer capable of producing 600 chassis per day ran the length of the building. At the end of the belt were thirteen car conveyors designed for a capacity of seven cars of different models—signs of the new era of flexible specialization that was seeing Ford progress beyond the era

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<sup>117</sup> Haskell and Fowler, *City of the Future*, 129; “Sheffield: Department Store of Steel!” *Swing* no. 3 (September 1, 1947): 20; “Sheffield Steel Corporation,” *Kansas Citizen* 4, no. 44 (November 3, 1925): 5-18; Shortridge, *Kansas City and How It Grew*, 119-120.

<sup>118</sup> Goldberg, *America in the Twenties*, 129-130.

<sup>119</sup> Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 550.

<sup>120</sup> Lyle W. Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 50; Haskell and Fowler, *City of the Future*, 99.

of the inexpensive and practical Model T. By 1927, the Sheffield plant received and sent out 65 carloads of freight daily, employed 1,250 men, and churned out no fewer than 300 cars every day.<sup>121</sup>

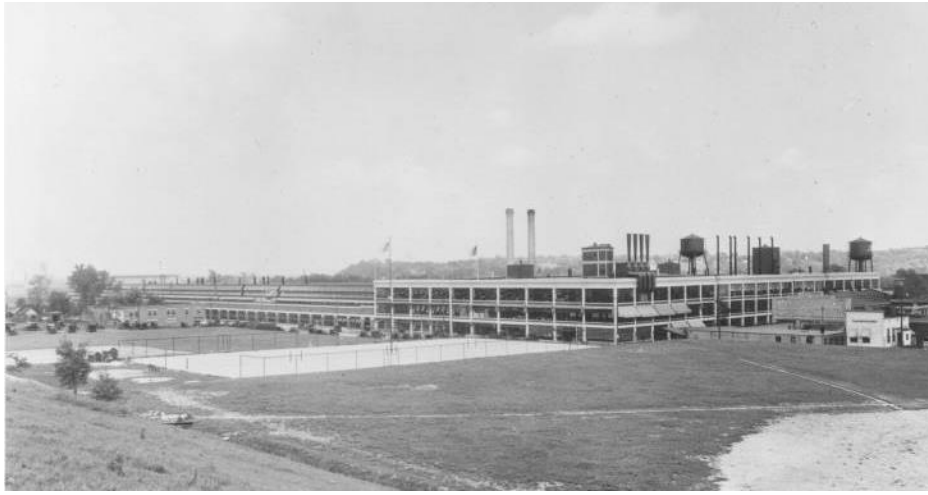


Figure 6: The expanded assembly plant of the Ford Motor Company in 1926.  
*P21, Box 1, Folder 3, Slide 47, MVSC, KCPL*

Ford's decision to expand the Kansas City plant made clear the city's prominence within the Southwest region, not to mention the country. Cars assembled in Kansas City could be transported efficiently and quickly to expanding markets, particularly in the quickly growing cities of Oklahoma and Texas—places where the oil boom had sent populations and incomes skyrocketing. And Kansas City was not simply a manufacturing and distribution center for the company. In 1928, Ford chose Kansas City as the pilot city for its financing division that would run the much-needed Ford credit plan, which allowed buyers to put down one-third of the value of the car and pay the remaining balance over a twelve-month period.<sup>122</sup> (Installment buying was one area that Ford was late in developing, and which rival General Motors had used to help capture thirty percent of the market by 1926.)

If the expansion of the Ford plant affirmed Kansas City's economic and geographic significance, then the decision by Chevrolet to build a huge assembly plant in the Leeds district in 1927 made the city a showcase for the era's major industrial showdown. In the late 1920s, Chevrolet was not merely Ford's rival. It was a company that was in the process of successfully capitalizing on Ford's undeniable weaknesses in the domain of consumer choice. Seeing that Ford's focus on practicality and function was not keeping up with the swelling culture of consumer choice and the desire for high styled goods, Chevrolet had oriented its manufacturing process towards a discerning market of buyers interested not only in the car as a necessity, but as a marker of personal taste and sophistication.<sup>123</sup> A modernized appearance, wrote Chevrolet president William Knudsen, would "remove the inevitable stigma which rests on low priced articles that show it."<sup>124</sup> That mindset was on display in Kansas City in early 1928, when Chevrolet showcased two new models of "smart appearance" at the Ararat Shriners Temple in downtown Kansas City in anticipation of the Leeds

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<sup>121</sup> *Kansas City Times* (September 7, 1923); *Kansas City Star* (May 11, 1924); *Kansas City Star* (January 23, 1927).

<sup>122</sup> *Kansas City Star* (June 25, 1928).

<sup>123</sup> Shindo, *1927 and the Rise of Modern America*, 18-19.

<sup>124</sup> Quoted in David Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800-1932: The Development of Manufacturing Technology in the United States* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 265.

factory's impending output. "The bodies are larger, longer and lower and more sweeping in design" than former models, noted the *Kansas City Star*. "Treatment of fenders, running boards, radiators, hoods and head lamps has produced a more massive appearance."<sup>125</sup>

Massive, powerful, and efficient—those were characteristics not only of the automobiles that were becoming a symbol of the city's new manufacturing age, but also of the factories that were giving the edges of the urban core a new look of industrial heft and a feel of advancement. If the fourteen greenhouses that peppered the industrially diverse Leeds district had helped define a place where "agriculture runs manufacturing and other forms of industry a close race for honors as the most outstanding contributions," that sense of balance was tipped irrevocably towards modern industry once ground was broken on the Chevrolet plant.<sup>126</sup> In the spring of 1928, old agricultural buildings, sheep pens, and smaller industrial outfits were removed to make way for the 30-acre site that would house a plant with the capacity to employ upwards of 2,000 men and women and churn out 350 cars per day.<sup>127</sup>

Accounts of the landscape transformation captured well the sense of power and ease with which a new echelon of gas-powered construction equipment transformed the landscape. "The great cranes," reported the *Kansas City Star*, "propelled by powerful engines and deftly operated despite their bulk, are giants of modern construction equipment. Adroitly one of them will pluck a heavy structural steel beam from a freight car. Without hesitation the burden is swung into place. Then follows the staccato banging of the riveting machines, dominating all of the other sounds incident in construction: the rumble of the concrete mixing plant, the shrill shriek of signal whistles, the subdued roar of engines and the reiterated clamor of steam shovels."<sup>128</sup>

The sense of productivity and specter of modernity was not confined to the industrial sites. When the Reliable Drivers Corporation established a large service branch in Kansas City near the Chevrolet plant, the *Kansas City Star* envisioned the flow of cars out into the hinterland. After the "trim, gleaming bodies," were shuttled from the Fisher body plant to the main assembly building, "a familiar sight on highways radiating from Kansas City will be a bus leading a long procession of gleaming new motor cars."<sup>129</sup> That sight of new automobiles flowing out of Kansas City into the markets of the hinterland expressed more than simply a new echelon of industrial power. It symbolized a city whose industrial identity was tied to the era's most transformative piece of technology. With the expanded Ford plant, the Chevrolet plant, and a host of auxiliary factories that built everything from truck bodies to floorboards to spokes, Kansas City had by many measures become the country's largest automobile assembly city after Detroit.<sup>130</sup>

Industrial districts north of the downtown were equally expressive of Kansas City's industrial transformation. The newest (and arguably most successful) was Fairfax. Located on the western bank

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<sup>125</sup> *Kansas City Star* (December 2, 1928); in "Chevrolet Motor Company," Mounted Clippings File (1900-1949), MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>126</sup> *Kansas City Journal-Post* (March 29, 1926); and *Kansas City Star* (November 2, 1928). In "Ford Motor Company," Mounted Clippings File (1900-1949), MVSC, KCPL. Leeds thirteen greenhouses produced ninety percent of city's local hothouse vegetables and nearly all of its homegrown flowers. By the late 1920s, Leeds was also home to the City Ice Company, the National Lumber & Creosoting Company (which built railroad ties and timbers), the Nel-Stone Company (specializing in concrete), and the Leeds Chemical Company.

<sup>127</sup> *Kansas City Journal-Post* (May 28, 1928; May 28, 1929); *Kansas City Star* (August 12, 1928); in "Chevrolet Motor Company," Mounted Clippings File (1900-1949), MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>128</sup> *Kansas City Star* (August 12, 1928); in "Chevrolet Motor Company," Mounted Clippings File (1900-1949), MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>129</sup> *Kansas City Star* (December 26, 1928; December 30, 1928).

<sup>130</sup> Charles E. Coulter, *Take Up the Black Man's Burden: Kansas City's African American Communities, 1865-1939* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 275; Haskell and Fowler, *City of the Future*, 130.

of the Missouri River just north of downtown Kansas City, Kansas, Fairfax was organized in the early 1920s by the Union Pacific Railroad, and quickly became the home of large plants of the Darby Company, a boilermaker and steel fabricator, as well as Sunshine Biscuits, who built a massive plant in the northwest portion of the crescent shaped district. Unlike many older districts, Fairfax reflected the new zoning trends that dictated exclusive land uses and eschewed uncoordinated development; the district was strictly designated for manufacturing, and the development of residential or retail properties was prohibited.<sup>131</sup>

Exclusive industrial land use did not, however, mean that there was not room for modernistic elegance—a reality proven by Fairfax’s standout feature: its state-of-the-art airport. Airplanes were as much a symbol of technological transformation as cars during the 1920s, and airfields were quickly becoming a symbol of economic and industrial sophistication in cities across America. Fairfax Airport was initially developed as the Sweeney Airport by private developers in the early years of the decade, but was taken over by the developer of Fairfax, the Woods Brothers Corporation, in 1928. Aware that prospective companies, commercial airlines, and aircraft manufacturers were increasingly drawn to well-built and well-designed airports rather than the primitive airfields of the previous decade, the Woods Brothers upgraded and modernized the airfield with asphalt runways, multiple hangars and maintenance shops, and an elegant terminal building built of orange brick with white terra cotta trim. An ornate control tower and an elaborately landscaped front lawn adorned with manicured hedges and a central reflecting pool added further dashes of elegance to the newest of the city’s industrial districts, which was revealing that technology and grace could cohabitate in the new industrial domain.<sup>132</sup>

Across the Missouri River, the North Kansas City Industrial District offered a third major landscape for development. First developed in 1912 by the North Kansas City Development Company—a subsidiary of the Armour and Swift packing interests and the Burlington Railway—the area on the floodplain north of the Missouri River boasted large blocks of cheap, level land, good switching facilities along rail lines, low tax rates, and a position outside of Kansas City’s municipal and political boundaries.<sup>133</sup> The district quickly became home for more industries as the 1920s progressed. One of the most significant was the Corn Products Refining Company factory—a leader in the growth of the city’s booming confectionary sector. Food additives and preservatives were becoming a mainstay of the food economy during the 1920s, and the Kansas City factory produced an array of products—Karo syrup, Mazola salad and cooking oil, and refined sugar—that were used not only to sweeten, but also to enhance shelf life, flavor, and value in the decade’s expanding array of foods.<sup>134</sup> Corn sugar was also a key ingredient for the exploding population of “alky cookers” who distilled contraband whiskey during Prohibition.<sup>135</sup>

The crown jewel of the area north of the river, however, was the Kansas City Municipal Airport. Opened in 1927 after a contentious battle, the airfield was the project of Chamber of Commerce President Lou Holland, who had pushed skeptical civic leaders to approve the construction of a new airport that would replace the far-flung and primitive Richards Field. In a time of quickly rising standards, Holland saw that bad airport conditions were a deterrent to major airlines. He also knew that Kansas City’s heartland location had the potential to make it an ideal location for major

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<sup>131</sup> Worley, *Development of Industrial Districts in the Kansas City Region*, 18-19.

<sup>132</sup> James W. Leyerzapf, “Aviation Promotion in Kansas City, 1935-1931,” *Missouri Historical Review* 66, no. 2 (January 1972): 261. See also Photos in General Collection (P1), Airports—Fairfax, MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>133</sup> See Adams, “The North Kansas City Urban District,” 413-414.

<sup>134</sup> Haskell and Fowler, *City of the Future*, 129; Terrell and Zimmer, *The Economic Base of Greater Kansas City*, (Section III), 89-91.

<sup>135</sup> See Laurence Bergreen, *Capone: The Man and the Era* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 130-131.

carriers—something that superstar pilot Charles Lindbergh acknowledged when he dedicated the new airport in 1927.<sup>136</sup>

Kansas City Municipal Airport had a rough start, and experienced significant competition from the much more polished Fairfax Airport.<sup>137</sup> Yet after an additional \$1 million bond issue smoothed out the edges of the new airport that sat in plain sight of downtown, Kansas City quickly boasted a long list of commercial airlines that serviced the 650-acre, four-runway facility—the largest in the country after Newark and Chicago.<sup>138</sup> These airlines quickly recognized the benefits of Kansas City’s continental centrality (important in the era before pressurized cabins and long-haul, overnight flights), and by the spring of 1930, eight passenger airlines offered service either from or through Kansas City. With new flights to cities like Denver, Dallas, Minneapolis, Chicago, Atlanta, New York, and Los Angeles, Kansas City also became the single stopover city on the landmark Transcontinental and Western Air (TWA) “all-air” service between New York and Los Angeles that began in 1930, meaning that groups of well-heeled passengers from two of the nation’s largest cities would spend the night in the urban core of Kansas City.<sup>139</sup>



Figure 7: Kansas City’s radiant new downtown in the late ‘20s, complete with skyscrapers and the Municipal Airport across the river.

*Curtiss Flying Service Collection, P9, Box 1, Folder 11, No. 53, MVSC, KCPL*

Those passengers would also experience what was probably one of the most dramatic landings in the country. Approaching the main runway from the south meant descending directly over the West Bottoms in parallel to the bluffs that boasted the city’s growing crop of impressive skyscrapers.

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<sup>136</sup> Leyerzapf, “Aviation Promotion in Kansas City,” 249; Julius A Karash and Rick Montgomery, *TWA: Kansas City’s Hometown Airline* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star Books, 2001), 16; *Where These Rocky Bluffs Meet, including the Story of the Kansas City Ten-Year Plan* (Kansas City, MO: Smith-Grievess Company, 1938), 95.

<sup>137</sup> Leyerzapf, “Aviation Promotion in Kansas City,” 258, 261.

<sup>138</sup> “Finest Airport on Earth,” *Future* 1, no. 10 (March 15, 1935): 8.

<sup>139</sup> Leyerzapf, “Aviation Promotion in Kansas City” 262; Karash and Montgomery, *TWA*, 14.

Passengers glimpsed at a distance of less than half a mile—from a uniquely modern (and often harrowing) perspective of height and speed—a city transformed. The airport’s central location also maximized the spirit of efficiency and convenience that many sought in air travel (and were experiencing in their daily lives). “It is a matter of municipal pride,” puffed a local paper, “that those arriving at this field should find an airport perfectly equipped and so convenient to the city as to be almost a miracle, compared with the ports of most large cities.” They were right. Once on the ground, the precincts of the skyline were within easy reach. With “the advantage of being only five minutes by car from the heart of the business district,” Kansas City’s airport was one of the only major airports so closely linked with a vibrant commercial core.<sup>140</sup> (Figure 7)

Kansas City’s rise as an air hub was about more than serving and impressing passengers. It was equally about industrial and corporate recruitment. In 1931, Holland successfully lobbied TW&A to relocate their consolidated maintenance and operating locations, along with their New York-based corporate headquarters, to Kansas City—a move that saw the city edge out Tulsa, Amarillo, Wichita, and St. Louis as the home base of the nation’s most iconic passenger airline. Convinced by the fact that Kansas City was within twelve hours of any point in the company’s system, TW&A was also sold on the promise of \$280,000 for new facilities—a sum provided by the city’s \$30,000,000 bond program that it passed in 1931 while most other cities were wallowing in fiscal despair.<sup>141</sup> Before long, the sight of aluminum planes descending towards Municipal Airport, emblazoned with TWA livery, became as much a mainstay of the Kansas City skyline as the towering buildings. During the next decade and a half, TW&A would pump over \$40,000,000 into the Kansas City economy through salaries and other materials, as well as lend the city an indispensable air of technological prestige.<sup>142</sup>

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Despite the magnitude of their transformation, Kansas City’s industrial districts retained a strong rural flavor even as factories replaced fields and the sound of airplane engines drowned out the hum of farm equipment. Many of the workers employed in the factories, after all, had rural roots, and were drawn to the residential areas of the industrial districts not only for their proximity to factories, but also for their rural flavor. Leeds, for instance, housed a vibrant community of African-Americans, many of whom had moved from the rural south and were adamant about maintaining their livelihoods based on small-scale agriculture.<sup>143</sup> There was even the all-black Holly Addition, begun in the early ‘20s for “Colored People Exclusively.”<sup>144</sup> A rural pace of life was evident in North Kansas City too, which one contemporary geographer called a “cultural landscape of marked individuality” in part because of the prevalence of agriculture. Even as late as 1930, some forty-four percent of the land was still used for growing corn, wheat, and alfalfa.<sup>145</sup>

That is not to say that these landscapes were not under the threat of urbanization. The construction of car plants in Leeds had obliterated great swaths of farmland, and in North Kansas City, the pressures of urban real estate were equally evident. Landowners hoping to cash in were clearly

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<sup>140</sup> “Finest Airport on Earth,” *Future* 1, no. 10 (March 15, 1935): 1, 8; Even Charles Lindbergh commented on the proximity between the airfield and downtown. See *Where These Rocky Bluffs Meet, including the Story of the Kansas City Ten-Year Plan*, 95.

<sup>141</sup> Leyerzapf, “Aviation Promotion in Kansas City,” 266.

<sup>142</sup> Leyerzapf, “Aviation Promotion in Kansas City,” 263-267; Karash and Montgomery, *TWA*, 14.

<sup>143</sup> Gary R. Kremer, “‘Just Like the Garden of Eden’: African-American Community Life in Kansas City’s Leeds,” *Missouri Historical Review* 98, no. 2 (January 2004): 121-144.

<sup>144</sup> *Kansas City Sun*, January 17, July 17, 1920; cited in Coulter, *Take Up the Black Man’s Burden*, 254.

<sup>145</sup> Adams, “The North Kansas City Urban District,” 423.

more interested in appealing to potential buyers than continuing to farm, and often picked their crops with a potential sell in mind: “One cannot ask a man city real estate prices for a corn field,” asserted one real estate official. “He tends to think of the plot as a farm rather than as a factory site or home site. [A] nice green field of alfalfa or young wheat creates a better impression than bare ground or growing weeds.”<sup>146</sup>

And just as the presentation of land was being geared towards an urban land market, so too were the residential communities becoming more urban in practice. The homeowners at Leeds, for instance, organized the Leeds Improvement Association in 1924 to work for the “betterment of living conditions,” a statement that meant not preserving rural ways, but rather securing additional industry.<sup>147</sup> It also meant implementing racially-motivated housing covenants and other mechanisms of property value maintenance—fixtures that were becoming standard for middle- and upper-middle-class urban neighborhoods. That same logic was apparent at the northern edge of the North Kansas City district, where the working-class development of Northtown offered well-built, one-story bungalows on paved streets for factory workers, and further restricted the area with racially restrictive covenants to “make the town attractive to the skilled workmen.”<sup>148</sup>

To understand how socially distant these new neighborhoods were compared to the older stock, one had to look no further than areas like Harlem, a nineteenth-century settlement in the North Kansas City district that hugged the northern bank of the Missouri River in the shadows of the Hannibal Bridge. A well-kept string of shanties and shacks, most with small gardens, Harlem was the sort of place where a rural and river-bound way of life was still palpable—one still colored, according to a local paper, with “shades of Mark Twain” and inhabited by “river folk ... [who] know themselves as such and who cannot sleep unless they hear its ceaseless ripple below their windows.”<sup>149</sup> Those sounds of a passing way of life, according to both photographic images and journalistic accounts, were quickly being drowned out. As Harlem’s residents looked across the river at the towering skyline, felt the pulse of automobiles and trains carrying manufactured goods and new ways of life, and heard the sounds of airplanes descending overhead in their approach towards Municipal Airport, they doubtless felt the reality that their riverside village now sat in the midst of a genuine metropolis.<sup>150</sup>

### ***The Modern Political Machine***

*“The most conspicuous fact about the Kansas City convention as compared to that recently held in the City of Brotherly Love is that the Democratic assemblage is without a boss. ... [T]here are no bosses in evidence, none in hiding, and none expected in Kansas City.” —Kansas City Times, July 1, 1900.*<sup>151</sup>

While skyscrapers and factories gave Kansas City’s urban core a bold outline announcing a new urban age, the city also expressed its modern guise through a singular political structure. According to one local paper, Interwar Kansas City possessed “the last of the great boss systems”—one in which the

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<sup>146</sup> Quote by an official of the North Kansas City Development Company, quoted in Adams, “The North Kansas City Urban District,” 423.

<sup>147</sup> “Leeds-Where Home and Industry Meet,” *The City Ice Man* 2, no. 3 (May 1925): 15.

<sup>148</sup> See Adams, “The North Kansas City Urban District,” 417.

<sup>149</sup> “Harlem Afternoon,” *Future* 1, no. 4 (February 1, 1935): 5.

<sup>150</sup> For another perspective of the contrast between the rural landscape and the expanding city, see *Kansas City Then & Now* 3 (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star Books, 2007), 62. The image shows a photo of farmers harvesting grain with horsepower, with the rising skyline of downtown Kansas City looming in the near distance.

<sup>151</sup> Quoted in Milligan, *Missouri Waltz*, 63.

“essentials of political power have been developed to a perfection ... that probably does not exist in any other American city today.”<sup>152</sup> Its architect was Democratic political boss Thomas J. Pendergast, a figure who seemed for many to embody the apotheosis of machine rule. While many were impressed with the machine that *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* called “second only to Tammany,” most explained the perfection of the city’s system by referencing the shocking degree of corruption and violence that seemed to be its consummate result. According to one prominent law enforcement official, the Pendergast machine was “a gigantic underworld octopus that reached its tentacles into business, public office, law enforcement, and even the privacy of the home.”<sup>153</sup> Judge Albert L. Reeves put it even more plainly. “The moral and civic destitution of Kansas City may be explained in a sentence. The underworld has the upper hand.”<sup>154</sup>

These superlatives described a political machine that was not only powerful, but also strikingly modern in the way that it blended new methods with tried-and-true tactics in contradictory ways. Pendergast might have been a burly, Irish-American Democrat whose “invisible government” had roots in the city’s poor immigrant wards, but when he inherited his older brother Jim’s “small-smooth working machine” and its “heritage of friendship and loyalty” in 1911, he faced a Kansas City in transition.<sup>155</sup> To be sure, Pendergast would double-down on building support in immigrant wards through strong-arm tactics, *quid pro quo* charity, and community building—the standard fare of boss politics as it developed in the nineteenth century. Yet so too would he have to resort to methods that would have been unthinkable to his brother. Republicans, reformers, and the local mafia presented new hurdles to power in Kansas City as the 1910s gave way to the ‘20s, just as a tectonic shift in the city’s demographics made old, Gilded Age methods to galvanizing power ineffective.<sup>156</sup> As a result, Pendergast developed a diverse array of tactics: strategically collaborating with political rivals, using illegal voting measures, tailoring his image to appeal to the genteel classes, and even pushing for certain reforms designed to unseat him.<sup>157</sup>

In the process, Pendergast achieved what many political bosses only dreamed of. He hijacked the city’s adoption of bureaucratic, “non-partisan” government to make his power unassailable. He gained power over the local mafia by way of an unprecedented and critical alliance. And he kept in motion a series of quasi-legitimate businesses that both funneled the city’s accumulating wealth directly into his own pockets and stocked the city with a landscape of buildings that doubled as symbols of his political thrust. By the height of his powers in the 1930s, Kansas City’s municipal government and his machine were virtually one and the same, and many residents—and reformers in particular—considered him to be nothing less than a dictatorial and despotic power.<sup>158</sup> It was not for

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<sup>152</sup> “What, Precisely, Is A Machine?” *Future* 1, no. 1 (January 11, 1935): 5.

<sup>153</sup> “Pen Picture of Thomas J. Pendergast Who Built Up a Democratic Machine in Kansas City Second Only to Tammany,” *St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat* (December 7, 1930), 2B; Reed, *Human Wolves*, 196.

<sup>154</sup> Albert L. Reeves, “The Shame of a Great City,” unpublished book manuscript, 107; located in K0640, *Albert L. Reeves Papers*, SHSMO-KC.

<sup>155</sup> Ralph G. Martin, *The Bosses* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1964), 60.

<sup>156</sup> Daniel Boorstin offers a good explanation of the rise and operation of traditional boss politics in New York City under Tammany Hall. See *The Americans: The Democratic Experience*, 252-261.

<sup>157</sup> Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine*, 62-63.

<sup>158</sup> One resident’s letter to the editor of a local paper in 1935 was representative: “The situation in Kansas City is a sore spot in the eyes of decent supporters of the Democratic Party in other parts of the country. ... The city government here is not a partisan government. It is a dictatorship.... This local group of thugs are not Democrats. They are no more than the lowest and most dangerous type of criminal, the traitor. They stoop to any alliance with murderers and the lesser backwash of the underworld, when they find this necessary to retain their power.” This view was typical of many reform-minded citizens in Kansas City, including many members of the black community. See Stanford Miller, Letter to the Editor, *Future* 1, no. 10 (March 15, 1935): 4-5.



nothing that Franklin Delano Roosevelt's undersecretary claimed in 1935 that "[n]owhere in this country has there been a bolder, more arrogant, ruthless and corrupt municipal government than in Kansas City."<sup>159</sup>

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Tom Pendergast began transforming his political machine from old-fashioned to modern in earnest starting in the winter of 1924, when a group of reform-minded boosters and businessmen—following precedents in many other cities—pushed for a new method of city governance designed to unseat boss rule and partisan politics in favor of a system of progressive bureaucracy.<sup>160</sup> Under the new charter plan, the city's thirty-two aldermen and mayor would be replaced with a nine-member, nonpartisan council led by an appointed city manager—a setup designed to be democratic, financially transparent, efficient, and merit-based.<sup>161</sup> As a prominent supporter made clear, “cities that have adopted the manager form of administration are showing the state and federal governments how democracy can be made to work freed from the political machinery that has been built up around them.”<sup>162</sup> Pendergast knew that this political structure was designed to unseat him, yet he also took note of how popular it seemed to be with Kansas Citians. The trick, he reasoned, was not to block its passage, but to back it, hijack it once it was in effect, and thereby use it to consolidate his power.

When voters handily approved the charter system on February 24, 1925, Pendergast moved quickly to ensure that at least five of the elected members of the new council were loyal to the machine. With that number, Pendergast could essentially install the head of Kansas City's government, as the nine-member council was the body in charge of selecting the city manager.<sup>163</sup> The boss got his wish in the special election for the new council members, and the new body quickly appointed Henry F. McElroy—a longtime Pendergast partisan—to be city manager. A folksy entrepreneur rather than a bookish bureaucrat, McElroy was well received by most Kansas Citians, who tended to view academics with suspicion and businessmen with reverence.<sup>164</sup> But most important, Pendergast knew that McElroy would waste no time in engineering Kansas City's municipal government in the machine's favor. McElroy immediately appointed Democrats to direct the city's eight departments, expanded the municipal payroll to accommodate the jobs that would be given out as rewards, and sharpened his

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<sup>159</sup> Quoted in “One Year Ago This Week,” *Future* 1, no. 8 (March 1, 1935): 3.

<sup>160</sup> See Zane L. Miller and Patricia M. Melvin, *The Urbanization of Modern America: A Brief History* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 106-109.

<sup>161</sup> In Kansas City, this meant replacing the sixteen wards with four large districts. Those districts would in turn elect one Council member each, who would complement four members elected at large. The ninth voting member was the Mayor, also elected at large, but stripped of his former powers. Those powers of ultimate control went instead to a city manager, elected by the Council, who was envisioned as an administrator and expert rather than a politician. Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine*, 77-78; Frank R. Hayde, *The Mafia and the Machine: The Story of the Kansas City Mob* (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2007), 22.

Reddig, *Tom's Town*, 116-117.

<sup>162</sup> Quoted in Reddig, *Tom's Town*, 116.

<sup>163</sup> “It ought to be as easy to get along with nine men as thirty-two,” Pendergast noted in advance of the election. Quoted in A. Theodore Brown, *Politics of Reform: Kansas City's Municipal Government, 1925-1950*, 34; See also Lawrence H. Larsen and Nancy J. Hulston, *Pendergast!* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 67; Reddig, *Tom's Town*, 117-118.

<sup>164</sup> Reddig, *Tom's Town*, 123.

pencil in preparation for his infamous “country bookkeeping” that would create a false facade of solvency in a new municipal economy of political favors.<sup>165</sup>

Only the most naive were blind to the fact that this outcome was a botched effort at reform. “What the students of better government had hoped for came to life as the opposite extreme” admitted a local, reform-minded paper. “The office holders, elected by the machine, were picked by the machine and served the machine only.” “Instead of their ideals being furthered, good government advocates saw the creation of a political principality, expending tax money, dispensing favors and creating politically controlled activities both in the field of legitimate business and in the underworld.”<sup>166</sup>

Yet Pendergast had much work to do if he was going to legitimately grow his power. The council elections had been close, and he knew that to expand his machine, he had to gain support in a territory that had come to dominate Kansas City and that was *terra incognita* for political bosses: the middle-class, white suburbs. By 1925, Kansas City’s boosters were regularly touting the former melting pot as the “most American city,” a moniker they supported with the city’s striking demographics: less than six percent of Kansas Citians were foreign born, and the city’s vibrant black community constituted less than ten percent of the population.<sup>167</sup> Kansas City, in short, was becoming a city increasingly dominated by white, middle-class culture—perhaps to an extent greater than in any other major urban center.

Traditional tactics of welfare provision were useless in landscapes of middle- and upper-middle-class privilege, but Pendergast reasoned that he could nonetheless supply something that appealed to Kansas City’s expanding middle classes: social institutions. In a city whose social strata were expanding and splitting, middle-class residents who could not afford (or did not socially qualify) for country club memberships and the like would seek other ways to experience enhanced social engagements—something increasingly in demand for those with rising incomes and disposable free time.<sup>168</sup>

The machine’s response, then, was to expand the typical activities of the ward-based political club for the developing social habits of the era. In contrast to the clubs of immigrant wards, which were usually active only during election seasons and shameless in their *quid pro quo* tactics, the suburban clubs would supply an array of social engagements geared towards building a sustained sense of community throughout the year. Clubs hosted not only dinners and dances, but also teas, bridge parties, and picnics. If those engagements were catered mostly to women, then the sports leagues sponsored by the clubs were geared towards men and youths. Recreational sports became wildly popular during the ‘20s, and the Democratic club in each ward had its own baseball team in summer and bowling league in winter. Whether in return for social or athletic provisions, beneficiaries were, of course, urged to promote the Pendergast slate.<sup>169</sup>

Galvanizing power over Kansas City’s cadre of graceful voters entailed more than satisfying their social appetites. In an era where outward image was becoming increasingly important as a mark of character, social standing, and influence, a shift in public relations was necessary to make Pendergast

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<sup>165</sup> Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine*, 86-87. In a telling move, the city’s high-minded Public Service Institute rejected any official connection with the municipal government after the reforms. See Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 70.

<sup>166</sup> “What, Precisely, Is A Machine?” *Future* 1, no. 1 (January 11, 1935): 3.

<sup>167</sup> See “Industrial Statistics of Kansas City,” Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, 1925-1935, MVSC, KCPL. This emphasis of the city’s “American” quality was emphasized in countless speeches by both municipal leaders and businessmen. See, for example, Merle H. Smith, and Citizens League Bulletin.

<sup>168</sup> Coleman, *The Kansas City Establishment*, 52-58.

<sup>169</sup> Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine*, 82-83; Harry Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds: Kansas City and Its Star* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 172.

look like an upstanding and prosperous member of society rather than the political boss that he was. Pendergast, in other words, had to give them an image of a boss who was as respectable as they were.

The boss started with a move that was straightforward and hugely symbolic. In 1926, he moved the headquarters of the Jackson County Democratic Club from its longtime North End location to the top floor of a two-story brick building at 1908 Main Street—just a few blocks south of the downtown core in a bustling area of warehouses, hotels, and shops. Located above a linen company and next door to the Ever Eat Cafe, the new office was framed by legitimate businesses, situated on a busy streetcar and bus line, and highly visible to the average Kansas Citian. “The working public,” remarks a historian, “rode past his club every morning and evening from the South Side to the downtown and North Side.”<sup>170</sup> That description captures the sense that the new headquarters was no longer rooted in the city’s increasingly segregated immigrant domain; it was now a piece of the legitimate, working city.

The “Power House” at 1908 Main also gave visibility and a sense of transparency to Pendergast’s political process. Those seeking favors would begin lining up in the early morning on one of the three days per week that Pendergast met with members of the public. After being vetted by Pendergast’s “secretary”—a tall, weatherbeaten former steamboat captain named Elijah Matheus—callers proceeded into Pendergast’s sparsely decorated office for meetings that were similarly to-the-point.<sup>171</sup> Successful visitors would depart with nothing more than a small piece of paper inscribed with brief instructions and the boss’s signature in red pencil—a silver bullet in Kansas City for cutting through red tape and obtaining quick, no-questions results. Most meetings lasted less than five minutes, but a line extending down the stairs and out onto the sidewalk was nevertheless a common sight.<sup>172</sup>

Attending to callers was a tried-and-true method of bossism, but Pendergast’s central location and regular hours gave that process a new degree of legitimacy. Cutting-red tape, that process suggested, was not just for the down-and-out in the immigrant wards. It was also the prerogative of the hard-pressed and hardworking businessman, a newly valorized character in the world of 1920s capitalism.<sup>173</sup> “The steps are worn,” a journalist observed of the office after ten years of use. “They have borne the weight of United States Senators, governors, mayors, councilmen, bankers, beggars, and gangsters—yes, and the lame, the halt, and the blind.”<sup>174</sup> This social breadth combined with the transparent process had a feel divorced from the old stereotype of machine politics. “The whole aspect of the place and the big man at the desk suggested that this was a business operation rather than a political activity,” writes a historian. “It was, in fact, big business. From this unpretentious headquarters Pendergast directed a large, smoothing functioning organization of precinct captains, block workers, party leaders and officials, a company that worked 365 days of the year.”<sup>175</sup>

Boss politics as big business also entailed a choreographed public relations campaign—one that cast the boss as a mainstream, successful entrepreneur. In a decade where shameless and even manipulative advertising was fast becoming the bread-and-butter of the American consumer market, Pendergast worked harder than any previous boss to hone a specific persona attractive to the majority

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<sup>170</sup> Reddig, *Tom’s Town*, 131.

<sup>171</sup> Former ward leader Matt Devoe attested to the boss’s straightforward process during meetings. See *Kansas City Star* (September 24, 1994); Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 74-5.

<sup>172</sup> Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 74-75.

<sup>173</sup> Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 291.

<sup>174</sup> Ralph Coghlan, “Boss Pendergast: King of Kansas City, Emperor of Missouri,” *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* (December 7, 1930); quoted in Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 73-75.

<sup>175</sup> Reddig, *Tom’s Town*, 131-132.

of voters.<sup>176</sup> The *Missouri Democrat*, a party-line paper published from 1925 to 1939, helped hone this image. Distributed across the city, county, and state, the eight-page weekly did not simply parrot the party line. It also sang the praises of the Pendergast-backed municipal government, fawned over local businessmen who were machine supporters, and projected an image of Pendergast that would resonate with Kansas City's middle-classes.<sup>177</sup>

That image was of a political boss transformed. Pendergast's might have inherited a political legacy "[b]orn in the old First ward, where liquor and women attracted gentleman and cowboy, scoundrel and adventure-seeking youth," but his new persona glossed his rowdy background with a patina of bourgeois refinement. Wanting to be seen as an elite benefactor of the city's people rather than a saloon politician and working-class hero bound to the immigrant wards, Pendergast projected an image of a bureaucratic boss who was more at home in the boardroom than in the run-of-the-mill bar. The *Missouri Democrat* and other publications emphasized how the boss had "developed high-brow ideas" and joined the Kansas City Club.<sup>178</sup> Photos of Christmas dinners for the poor wards made plain that Pendergast still prioritized charity, but no longer officiated such engagements. In contrast to the eastern bosses, he rarely played up his Irish heritage—an identity that would win him little in white-dominated Kansas City.<sup>179</sup>

Pendergast also broke with the boss tradition by embracing a suburban life of privilege distant from the immigrant wards. In 1928, he moved his family into a custom designed and lavishly appointed French Provincial mansion at 5650 Ward Parkway—the city's toniest new boulevard in J. C. Nichols Country Club District.<sup>180</sup> There, as the *Missouri Democrat* continually emphasized, Pendergast lived as a devoted family man and respectful neighbor. He drove elegant cars, bought precious antiques, and dressed in fine suits, hats, and spats. (Figure 8) Like his suburban contemporaries, he indulged in posh travels, and was often depicted before extravagant trips to New York, Paris, and London, usually with his well-dressed wife and children in tow.<sup>181</sup> Powerful criminals were rarely shy about living in luxury, particularly in the 1920s, but Pendergast's brand of refinement was expressed as that of a responsible citizen enjoying the spoils of hard work. "He busted himself making a reputation as a substantial citizen," writes a historian, "the man of property, the good family man, the friend of the masses, the Jacksonian of large simplicities who hadn't been spoiled by wealth."<sup>182</sup>

Pendergast likely knew he would never be wholeheartedly accepted by the city's ruling elites, many of whom were Republicans, but he was aware that the fashionable circles of the middle- and upper-middle classes would warm to him if he seemed like more of an affluent businessman than a boss.<sup>183</sup> Many did. But in an era when advertising was widening the gulf between appearances and reality, critics were quick to point out the boss's often awkward posturing. Pendergast's St. Joseph roots, folksy speech, and reputedly lowbrow tastes in food made it easy for detractors to paint him as a nouveau-riche impostor, and his heavy-set, thick-jowled physique (he stood only five feet, eight inches tall but weighed 230 pounds) cast him as "a perfect picture of the political boss as envisioned

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<sup>176</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920's* (1931; repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 145-146.

<sup>177</sup> Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine*, 83-84; Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 92. See *Missouri Democrat* (January 6, 1933; April 28, 1933; September 8, 1933).

<sup>178</sup> "First Ward to Ward Parkway," *Future* 1, no. 3 (March 15, 1935): 3.

<sup>179</sup> Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 10.

<sup>180</sup> Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 79-80.

<sup>181</sup> "Like Garbo, He Wants to Be Alone," *Future* 1, no. 21: 3.

<sup>182</sup> Reddig, *Tom's Town*, 133; see also Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 71-73.

<sup>183</sup> Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine*, 83-85; Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 92.

by cartoonists.”<sup>184</sup> Republicans likened his appearance in haute couture to that of a boss from a Nash political cartoon.<sup>185</sup> Others were eager simply to pounce on what they saw as a tasteless and disingenuous effort in keeping up appearances. After reports of a robbery at the Pendergast home resulted in a loss of \$150,000 worth of clothing and jewels in 1929, machine enemy Albert Beach was quick to deliver a searing quip in the *Kansas City Star*: “My friends, the Republican party is no longer the silk stocking party. The Democratic party is now.”<sup>186</sup>



Figure 8: Tom Pendergast in haute couture at the wedding of his daughter, Marceline, in 1929.

*Joseph H. “Jack” Wally, Jr. (1913-2006) Collection, K0329*

*State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center, Kansas City (hereafter SHSMO-KC)*

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Building a modernized political machine entailed more than constructing a new persona of legitimacy. It also meant doubling down on old, strong-arm tactics in ways that undergirded that facade with a foundation of sheer intimidation. To develop that power, Pendergast had to deepen ties in established

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<sup>184</sup> Milligan, *Missouri Waltz*, 79.

<sup>185</sup> Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 5-6; Reddig, *Tom’s Town*, 33, 135.

<sup>186</sup> *Kansas City Star* (September 4, 1929).

locales that could serve as crucibles of defense—places where he could court thugs and racketeers that would help grease the wheels of the machine’s extensive financial and political network. By both strategy and necessity, Pendergast found that place in Kansas City’s North End, where the Kansas City mafia had—much like the Democratic machine—asserted its power and made the most of a new set of circumstances.

Italians had begun settling in the North End during early years of the century after the city’s commercial and political interests abandoned the area in favor of the upland downtown. The newcomers expanded their cultural footprint by becoming key players in the kaleidoscopic City Market, where they opened bakeries, groceries, and food stalls next to those of “quiet and anxious” local farmers and boisterous Greeks.<sup>187</sup> By 1920, their presence was so decisive in the area that the city rechristened the park to the east of the market Columbus Square and equipped it with Bocce greens.<sup>188</sup> As the Italian population grew over the next decade (it was one of the only minority groups in Kansas City to do so), journalists took note of how distinctive the neighborhood had become. Have you been to the Holy Rosary Church, asked a journalist in reference to the neighborhood’s quaint, red-brick parish, “where peasant women, apparently just come from the field or the vinyards [*sizi*] on the slopes of the Apennines, walk softly in, their heads covered with dark shawls, to kiss their hands with loving reverence, to the figures above the altars?”<sup>189</sup> That cultural type, noted another local writer, was common in the North End, but it was accompanied by an equally common—and far more intimidating—figure: the “big shot gangster, in his big car with his body guard and his henchmen.”<sup>190</sup>

Sicilian immigrants had established mafia activity in the area shortly after the turn of the century, and by the late 1920s, one figure in particular—the dapper and slightly built Giuseppe “Johnny” Lazia—had asserted himself as both the head of the city’s mafia as well as a possible adversary for Pendergast. In May 1928, the Brooklyn-born mafia leader succeeded in ousting Pendergast crony Mike Ross as the controller of the ward. If at first Pendergast was alarmed at the prospect of losing power in one of his most loyal areas, he quickly began to think otherwise: Lazia ended up delivering more votes for the Democrats than Ross ever had, and his strong-arm methods in deposing Ross had been impressive to say the least. As one historian points out, “by boldly challenging Boss Tom and then immediately doing him a favor, Lazia had effectively beat [the machine] and joined them at the same time.”<sup>191</sup>

Rather than fight back, Pendergast opted for an unprecedented alliance with the leader, recognizing that he could harness the mafia’s organizational strengths to buttress his organization’s strong-arm rule with. One of Lazia’s strengths, other than his political savvy, derived from a unique feature of Kansas City’s organized crime structure. As a smaller city that was removed from the influence of larger crime capitals, Kansas City developed a family hierarchy that was far more flexible than those in Chicago or New York—a structure that allowed Lazia to become both the front man and boss of his organization while maintaining a strong network of behind-the-scenes control.<sup>192</sup> Lazia’s dual role made him all the more useful to Pendergast, who capitalized on the well-run mafia organization and its public relations abilities to do the machine’s dirty work.

The bulk of that work consisted of brute force. The North End was the known hub of an army of thugs who would intimidate the city into supporting the machine on Election Day.

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<sup>187</sup> Journey to the K. C. Market,” *Future* 1, no. 5 (February 8, 1935): 2, 6.

<sup>188</sup> Shortridge, *Kansas City and How it Grew*, 91; on Italian immigration into the area, see also William Ouseley, *Open City: True Story of the KC Crime Family* (Kansas City, MO: The Covington Group, 2008), 5-7.

<sup>189</sup> “Kansas City Journey,” *Future* 1, no. 3 (January 25, 1935): 5.

<sup>190</sup> “Italian Journey,” *Future* 1, no. 9 (March 8, 1935): 7.

<sup>191</sup> Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine*, 126-127; Hayde, *The Mafia and the Machine*, 31-32.

<sup>192</sup> Hayde, *The Mafia and the Machine*, 83-84.

“Everything including bloodshed seems fair on election day” in Kansas City, wrote *Future*, a sentiment that alluded to the previous year’s “Bloody Election” in which Pendergast ruffians had beat to death four detractors and seriously injured eleven others.<sup>193</sup> The violence was not a surprise to most. Election intimidation and fraud had become the Pendergast machine’s primary weapon over the years, and countless accounts by residents and law enforcement officials testify to the egregious violations undertaken at the polls. In the 1950s, two journalists would point out that no other city had known vote fraud on such a large scale, and that its elections “had been as thoroughly rigged as Russian [ones].”<sup>194</sup>

“The ruffian or thug, [and] oftentimes an ex-convict,” writes Judge Albert L. Reeves, “was conspicuous,” operating “both on the inside of the polling place and on the outside.” Black, unmarked sedans cruising out of the North End—their passengers armed with machine guns—were a common sight of intimidation on election day, as was the sight of ruffians patrolling the polling stations, where they would openly intimidate, vilify, and even physically abuse anyone trying to challenge the status quo, whether voting citizens or judges and clerks questioning the shady handling of prepared ballots. Bullied judges would toss Republican leaning ballots in the wastebasket, often in full sight of voters. Protest would only prompt assault, and a common sight on Kansas City election day was a voter, “rendered unconscious” and “bleeding from ears and nose,” being carried out of the polling place. “One way rides” were often on offer.<sup>195</sup> It was this sort of force that led *Future* to write in 1935 that while “Kansas City is one of the typical American cities . . . its people live in a state of coercion from heartless exactions and atrocities of the machine.”<sup>196</sup> Thugs were also on call to assist machine loyalists with any strong-arm favors they needed.

Lazia’s networks of power were useful to Pendergast in another way: they helped him maintain a “well-ordered town” that permitted a regulated (and therefore profitable) economy of vice and crime. Pendergast saw to it that Lazia became one of his “chief lieutenants,” a role that Lazia—a seasoned racketeer—was more than capable of.<sup>197</sup> As the unacknowledged head of the city’s rackets, Lazia divided the city into five districts, “staffed” each one with a gang of his organization, and worked out a mutually beneficial alliance with Al Capone, who envisioned Kansas City as an ideal bootlegging distribution hub. He also strategically disposed of racketeers who stood in his way, and then exploited their ties to other cities to galvanize his power.<sup>198</sup> As a result, Lazia’s rackets became some of Kansas City’s largest: he forced a cheap brand of coffee on the city’s retailers, lunch counters, and diners; his towel business meant that patrons in barber shops, office building restrooms, stores, and hotels, patrons dried their hands and bodies with linens sold by his interest; and in a twist of symbolic irony, he even got into the laundry industry: his Protective Association for Dry Cleaners forced launderers to pay sums or risk vandalism or violence.<sup>199</sup> Lazia even operated a soft drink plant whose beverages were forced on the city’s park concessions, restaurants, hotels, and drug stores—an interest referenced by a journalist who lamented that that Kansas City had become a place “where even your bottle of

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<sup>193</sup> “Police Solicitude,” *Future* 1, no. 24 (June 21, 1935): 4; Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 112.

<sup>194</sup> Haskell and Fowler, *City of the Future*, 154.

<sup>195</sup> Albert L. Reeves, “The Shame of a Great City,” 36-49.

<sup>196</sup> Quoted in “One Year Ago This Week,” *Future* 1, no. 8 (March 1, 1935): 3.

<sup>197</sup> Pendergast referred to Lazia as such in a letter to FDR’s postmaster general in 1933 that attempted to dispute charges of Lazia’s leadership in Kansas City’s racket- and crime-dominated climate. Such a gesture, writes Frank Hayde, reveals the extent of the alliance between Pendergast and Lazia, as no major political boss had ever gone to such lengths to both admit and defend a mafia leader. See Hayde, *The Mafia and the Machine*, 36-37; and Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 281-282.

<sup>198</sup> Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 110.

<sup>199</sup> Samuel S. Mayerberg, *Chronicle of an American Crusader* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1944), 116-117.

soda pop is a racket.”<sup>200</sup> For the most part, this was ideal for Pendergast; stronger rackets bolstered the mafia’s power, and by extension both buttressed the machine’s political and financial security.

Pendergast targeted Lazia for another important role: that of the unofficial head of the police force. Cooperative law enforcement was critical to maintaining a lucrative “wide-open town,” and when the city won home rule for its police force in 1930, Pendergast gave Lazia the power to recruit and control deputies, many of whom were former convicts. (It did not help that low police wages made bribery a failproof form of control.) Lazia also saw to it that the police cooperated in giving sanctuary to convicts looking for a place to hide out. One of Lazia’s most important goals was to establish a policy by which criminals could—for a high price—hide out in Kansas City unmolested. The city, after all, sat at a sweet spot in the infamous “corridor of crime” that ran from St. Paul, Minnesota to Dallas, Texas. The territory was known for its score of roaming, Prohibition- and Depression-era desperadoes whose small-town roots, typically impoverished backgrounds, unprecedented access to cars, guns, and criminal networks, and appetite for reckless and often horrific acts of violence made them dangerous as well as desperate for sanctuary.<sup>201</sup>

If Lazia’s strategy was unique, its result was predictable. Crime—already a major element of urban life in Kansas City in the ‘20s—surged to new heights in the early ‘30s as criminals flooded into the city. “In 1934,” recalls one law enforcement official, “Kansas City was sizzling, and I am not speaking of the weather.”<sup>202</sup> A local paper put it more sarcastically in early 1935: “New York is feeling better. The suicide rate is lower than it has been since 1927. The homicide rate in Kansas City, however, indicates the usual high spirits.”<sup>203</sup>

Those spirits were felt across the city in an array of crimes. Kidnappings became a weekly occurrence, and high profile figures—often the machine’s own cronies—were often targets.<sup>204</sup> Car thefts were another Kansas City mainstay—the high incidence of which was reflected in the city’s astronomically high theft coverage insurance premiums: in Kansas City, a \$500 policy in 1935 cost \$26.50, compared to \$5.25 in Los Angeles, \$8 in St. Louis, and \$11.75 in Boston.<sup>205</sup> Local journalists also noted how the city’s stream of criminals left a trail in the city’s pawn shops. In 1935, an entourage of small-town sheriffs descended on the “hock shop paradise” to protest its blind-eyed operation of machine-backed pawn shops that sold stolen merchandise from small-town retailers.<sup>206</sup>

The *Kansas City Star* had taken pains to play down the city’s rising crime rate in the late 1920s, but as the new decade unfolded, no one was fooled.<sup>207</sup> “Look at Kansas City,” lamented the *Journal-Post* in 1931. “Despite our record of machine gunnings, the city ... was the scene of murders to the number of 21 for every 1,000 persons ... while the rate in Chicago was only 15. Kansas City’s rating in all crimes committed per 1,000 population was 22.48, as against an average of 17.67 for the twenty-nine cities studied.”<sup>208</sup> To make matters worse, Kansas City’s relatively small size made the violence seem all the more incendiary and pervasive.

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<sup>200</sup> *Future* 1, no. 10 (March 15, 1935): 3.

<sup>201</sup> Hayde, *The Mafia and the Machine*, 39-40; Milligan, *Missouri Waltz*, 11.

<sup>202</sup> Milligan, *Missouri Waltz*, 10.

<sup>203</sup> *Future* 1, no. 12 (March 29, 1935): 1.

<sup>204</sup> Hayde, *The Mafia and the Machine*, 51-56.

<sup>205</sup> “Be Proud, Citizens!” *Future* 1, no. 1 (January 11, 1935): 8. See also “Leave Him Have It!” *Future* 1, no. 25 (June 28, 1935): 4; and Reeves, “The Shame of a Great City,” 107.

<sup>206</sup> “Hock Shop Paradise,” *Future* 1, no. 8 (March 1, 1935): 1, 3, 8.

<sup>207</sup> Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 271.

<sup>208</sup> “Kansas City’s Shame,” *Kansas City Journal-Post* (March 11, 1931). As Haskell and Fowler write, if the city’s late 1920s soundtrack had featured the “rumble of building machinery,” the new voice of the 1930s was the submachine gun.” See *City of the Future*, 132.



The most shocking demonstrations of crime in Interwar Kansas City, however, were the shootouts that happened when lines of power crossed in unfortunate ways. Unlike urban mobsters, who typically preferred to operate in the shadows, the roaming desperadoes of middle America who found sanctuary in Kansas City were not strangers to crimes committed in broad daylight or in areas typically immune to violence. Newspaper articles lamented both the incidence of crime on respectable streets as well as at all times of day.<sup>209</sup> The infamous “summer of 1933” was a case in point. On August 12, 1933, Sheriff Thomas Bash interrupted the attempted murder of a liquor racketeer by thug and Lazia friend Charles Gargotta while on his way home, leading to a dramatic shootout on Armour Boulevard in which Bash killed two of Gargotta’s accomplices.<sup>210</sup> (Figure 9)



Figure 9: In a scene typical of city plagued by violence, a crowd gathers around the car holding the corpse of mobster Sam Scola, who was shot by Sheriff Tom Bash during a botched hit attempt on a sweltering summer night in August 1933.

*Zeldin Collection of Journal-Post Glass Negatives, P29, Box 19, Folder 22, #4, MVSC, KCPL*

This event came only two months after the city’s most high-profile shootout, the Union Station Massacre. On the morning of June 17, a trio of the FBI’s most wanted—Charles Arthur “Pretty Boy” Floyd, Verne Miller, and Adam Richetti—surprised a federal entourage escorting infamous bank robber Frank Nash to a vehicle in the parking lot of Union Station bound for the Kansas City Division of the FBI. The thirty-second shootout intended to free Nash killed not only four federal law enforcement officials, but also Nash himself.

The Union Station Massacre was a key event in the “stain of crime” that the Associated Press lamented had been left on America in 1933.<sup>211</sup> Its grim toll also prompted J. Edgar Hoover to enact major changes to give federal agents more autonomy and defense in their fight against crime; shortly after Kansas City’s bloodiest shootout yet, agents were authorized to officially carry guns and make

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<sup>209</sup> “Saturday Has Become a Day of Deaths in Kansas City,” *Kansas City Star* (August 13, 1933).

<sup>210</sup> “A Night of Terror,” *Kansas City Star* (August 12, 1933).

<sup>211</sup> “Stain of Crime on 1933,” *Kansas City Star* (January 1, 1934).

arrests.<sup>212</sup> The event was also central for Hoover's focus on the "debauchery of law and order" and his "war on crime" during the '30s. The "gory scenes of multiple crimes" and the "armed fury of entrenched interests" that shackled Kansas City were prime targets for his newly beefed up FBI.<sup>213</sup> And when Kansas City was inexplicably absent from the FBI's newly inaugurated quarterly crime reports of the nation's largest cities during its violence-plagued years of 1933 and 1934, *Future* incisively speculated about the causes of the omission: "Either our conscientious officials were ashamed to submit one or else it was not acceptable [to the authorities]."<sup>214</sup>

Kansas City's law enforcement, by contrast, had done little in reaction to the violence on June 17. The police ignored the three killers, who drove off and spent a quiet night in Kansas City where they had been living in luxury. The next day, Lazia arranged for them to be guided safely out of town, an act that underscored the fact that he had both given them sanctuary as well as his blessing to commit the crime in the first place.<sup>215</sup>

In an event that many saw as poetic justice, Lazia himself was gunned down in the early morning hours of July 10, 1934, as he was walking into his elegant park Central Hotel apartment. Pendergast was certainly distraught that his right-hand man had been extinguished from the Kansas City crime scene. Yet by the mid-'30s, the coordination between the mafia and Pendergast worked like a well-oiled machine. Lazia's close associate Charles Carrollo quickly stepped in to act as Pendergast's new "lieutenant," and the wide-open town simply kept expanding.<sup>216</sup> Kansas City's mafia-supported machine, it seemed, was invulnerable.

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In addition to hijacking reform, remaking his image, and collaborating with organized crime, Pendergast flexed his muscle in a more material and portentous way. While his business interests could have "filled a phonebook," the sharpest arrow in his financial quiver was the Ready Mixed Concrete Company that he had started with former ward captain Michael Ross in 1928.<sup>217</sup> The company's name derived from its early adoption of a new method: concrete was pre-mixed at a central site and then distributed with water-tight trucks—a system that yielded a more reliable and standardized product, incurred far lower labor costs, and avoided the unsightly mess of on-site mixing. This technology gave the company an edge over many competitors, and thereby allowed Pendergast to continue his tendency of blurring the line between legitimacy and corruption. Contract fixing and racketeering were doubtless common practices, especially for smaller builders—a group with little defense against Pendergast-appointed city inspectors who would reliably invalidate permits that did not use Ready Mixed. But so too did the company fairly win big projects. A remodeling contract for the anti-machine

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<sup>212</sup> Robert Unger, *The Union Station Massacre: The Original Sin of J. Edgar Hoover's FBI* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Star Books, 2005), 232-234. See also "Crime War Starts," *Kansas City Times* (July 14, 1933).

<sup>213</sup> Newspaper clipping, "Debauchery of Law Held Greatest Threat to United States," May 20, 1938, u. d., Quoted in Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 9.

<sup>214</sup> "Strip Act the Police Missed," *Future* 1, no. 9 (March 8, 1935): 1, 8. See also "Crime Not Reported," *Citizens' League Bulletin* (March 16, 1935): 460; "KC Crime Not Reported," *Citizens' League Bulletin* (June 22, 1935): 515.

<sup>215</sup> Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine*, 127; Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 282.

<sup>216</sup> Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine*, 128; Rudolph H. Hartmann, *The Kansas City Investigation: Pendergast's Downfall, 1938-1939* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), 25.

<sup>217</sup> Ross owned a namesake construction company in which Pendergast had substantial interests. Unsurprisingly, Ross Construction often won city contracts. See Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 60; Hartmann, *The Kansas City Investigation*, 13.

*Kansas City Star* facility prompted a quick retort from Pendergast to accusations of graft: “Did I coerce the *Kansas City Star* when they bought cement from my firm?”<sup>218</sup>

Legitimately or not, Ready Mixed Concrete quickly became a monopoly, and detractors saw a city increasingly inscribed with the boss’s most lucrative commodity. During the final years of the 1920s and the earliest of the ‘30s, Pendergast’s concrete was poured into the foundations, piers, and floors of the city’s exploding crop of fireproof skyscrapers, apartment hotels, and factories, all of which required extra thick piers, floors, and partitions.<sup>219</sup> Full-page ads in the *Kansas City Journal-Post* advertised that the company’s resume included the city’s most celebrated new buildings, including the Kansas City Power and Light Building, the Professional Building, and the elegant apartment hotels ringing the Country Club Plaza.<sup>220</sup>

The onset of the depression brought a virtual halt to private building, but Pendergast quickly reinforced that his secret weapon was his ability to turn a looming threat into a boon. His plan was to urge McElroy—along with Chamber of Commerce President Conrad Mann and Jackson County Judge Harry S. Truman—to push forward a ramped-up version of McElroy’s 1929 Ten-Year Plan, a colossal, \$40 million project of infrastructural improvements and new buildings that would transform the civic landscape of Kansas City into that of an up-to-date metropolis—something it sorely needed after years of neglecting its public buildings, hospitals, and public spaces.<sup>221</sup> Under the Ten-Year Plan, Kansas Citians would see the construction of new parks and boulevard facilities, sewers and water mains, trafficways leading into downtown and out of the city, flood control channels, hospitals, an improved municipal airport, and a full-scale civic center comprised of a City Hall, County Courthouse, Municipal Auditorium, Police Headquarters, and Jail.

The city’s most substantial building program to date would, of course, require an unprecedented volume of concrete, meaning that Pendergast would be among the single largest financial beneficiaries.<sup>222</sup> But the more lasting significance of the twenty projects was the way in which they would give Pendergast a newly varied sense of power and legitimacy. Supplying concrete for city projects could help solidify both his professional image and his company’s reputation among the strikingly comprehensive cadre of Plan supporters. It was perhaps obvious that organized labor (a group traditionally associated with Pendergast) would be supportive, but the plan’s promise to enhance the city’s image and magnetism for business with a laissez-faire, city-based approach to economic challenge made it equally popular among Republican businessmen and pro-Hoover blue bloods. Most important for Pendergast, however, the Plan would bind his legitimated image to an unprecedented network of buildings and spaces that signaled Kansas City’s municipal prowess. Republican businessmen had hoped that the Plan would fashion their metropolis into America’s “Greatest Inland

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<sup>218</sup> Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 87.

<sup>219</sup> J. Harry Jones, “City Hall Here Ranks High Among Municipal Buildings,” *Kansas City Star*, u.d. in Mounted Clippings, Folder 41.1; Native Sons of Kansas City Scrapbooks (K0395); SHSMO-KC; see *Kansas City Journal-Post* (December 31, 1929).

<sup>220</sup> *Kansas City Journal-Post* (December 31, 1929).

<sup>221</sup> Both Mann and Truman had Pendergast ties. Mann, a liberal Republican, often served as a link between the Republicans and Pendergast. Truman largely owed his ascension in politics to the boss; he was, for instance, called the “senator from Pendergast” after his election to the U.S. Senate in 1934. Yet he long was torn by the pressures the machine put on him. See Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 296, 419n31; “Mr. Truman Makes an Effort,” *Future* 1, no. 3 (January 25, 1935): 3. On the neglect of Kansas City’s public spaces during the 1920s, see Shortridge, *Kansas City and How It Grew*, 73.

<sup>222</sup> Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 270. The machine’s enforced system of automatic kickbacks doubtless funneled even more money into Pendergast’s pockets. While scholars have admitted that the extent of the boss’s business interests is incalculable, his known financial interests suggest that regardless of who won various construction contracts, Pendergast benefitted in some way.

City,” but Pendergast doubtless knew that that such greatness would, at least for the city’s voting public, be tethered to him and his regime.

That elision was virtually ensured on May 26, 1931, when voters passed the Ten-Year Plan’s bond issues by a four-to-one margin. Almost immediately, workers began breaking ground (heavy machinery was discouraged when possible to maximize the number of individuals employed) on the twenty projects that promised a transformation of Kansas City’s landscape. And almost as quickly, Ready Mixed concrete was poured into foundations, sewer conduits, trafficways, runways, and drainage beds that constituted a remade city.

While the range and location of projects was extensive, none expressed the thrust of municipal power and its connection with machine politics as forcefully as the twenty-two-story Jackson County Courthouse (at 295 feet) and the thirty-story Kansas City City Hall (at 423 feet), both built as a unified civic complex on either side of Twelfth Street between Oak and Locust Streets—blocks from the city’s commercial nerve center of Twelfth and Main.<sup>223</sup> Designed by local firm Wight and Wight in the ponderous, late-’30s interpretation of stripped classicism, both buildings featured blunt, soaring towers rising out of broad-shouldered bases, all marked with the vertical striations of contrasting bays of windows and spandrels.<sup>224</sup> Generous massing gave the city’s inflated municipal government plenty of growing room in a sound architectural surrounding—a major shortfall of the older facilities. Yet so too did it give Kansas City’s municipal and judicial headquarters a spirit of intimidation and monolithic power—fitting for a city where everyone interpreted city government as simply another name for the machine.

The commanding architectural poise was a clue to the sheer volume of concrete—20,000 cubic feet—contained in its foundations, floors, partitions, and piers, which descended forty-five feet into the bedrock. Yet that sheer size was only one indicator of its status as a symbol of consolidated urban power. McElroy and other Pendergast-backed city leaders also saw to it that the architectural firms pulled out the stops on an iconographic program that clearly articulated the city’s greatness. The interior, for instance, boasted bronze elevator doors depicting the four major modes of transit—the riverboat, car, rails, and airplane—that had defined Kansas City’s history.<sup>225</sup> The more explicit story appeared in the form of prominent bas relief panels running along the windowless sixth floor just under the building’s primary setback. McElroy had insisted that these vignettes “mean something and not be just a band of ornament.”<sup>226</sup> The result was a loose narrative depicting the “early drama of the city’s birth.” Sixteen bas relief panels (four on each facade) offered a triumphalist narrative of Kansas City’s origins, with each facade featuring a different theme: political and social ideals on the south, industrial development on the north; territorial discovery on the west; and first settlement on the east.<sup>227</sup> The prevailing theme, of course, was Manifest Destiny, albeit one oriented towards urban successes.

That reality was present in sharpest relief in the final panel, which features the city’s earliest prophet, Senator Thomas Hart Benton (great-great uncle of the painter) gesturing towards a

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<sup>223</sup> While Independence was the seat of Jackson County, Kansas City was established as an additional center of government activity due to its size and influence. The new courthouse served the western half of the county.

<sup>224</sup> High-rise civic buildings in the United States were initially developed during the 1920s, starting with both the Los Angeles City Hall (1926-1928) and the Nebraska State Capitol building (c. 1920-1932). See Bayer, *Art Deco Architecture*, 177.

<sup>225</sup> J. Harry Jones, “City Hall Here Ranks High among Municipal Buildings,” *Kansas City Star*, u.d. In Mounted Clipping, Folder 41.1; Native Sons of Kansas City Scrapbooks (K0395); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>226</sup> “City Hall Frieze Will Give Story of K. C. Growth,” *Kansas City Journal-Post* (November 15, 1936), in Mounted Clipping, folder 41.1; Native Sons of Kansas City Scrapbooks (K0395); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>227</sup> Jones, “City Hall Here Ranks High Among Municipal Buildings.”

modern skyline. Benton had allegedly delivered a grand proclamation upon seeing the site that would become Kansas City in the mid-nineteenth century that “where the rocky bluff meets and turns aside the sweeping current of this mighty river ... a large commercial and manufacturing community will congregate, and less than a generation will see a great city on these hills.”<sup>228</sup> That great city, according to the final panel, was one where the high rise City Hall and its Courthouse accomplice loom large over the city, all under a soaring eagle of destiny.<sup>229</sup> In that flourish of self-reference, the designers seemed to be fulfilling McElroy’s wish that the new City Hall be seen as an architectural apotheosis written in the stars—a rendition of a modern structure that fulfilled a traditional narrative of urban ascendance.

The construction of such an imposing set of civic buildings in the midst of a Depression had a profound impact on the city’s image. These new structures demonstrated that the city was undergoing a self-imposed update geared towards a better future, and that its sense of municipal power was compatible with up-to-date building forms.<sup>230</sup> It also showcased the city’s embrace of New Deal (PWA) workers. The \$6 million building received over \$1.5 million in PWA grants that employed several hundreds of workers.

Yet the fact that this achievement was so tightly bound to the rise of an increasingly intractable political boss, his municipal marionettes, and his concrete empire meant that whatever notions of ambition and power were expressed by the buildings were inseparable from Pendergast’s dominance. It is no wonder that one journalist referred to the City Hall and Courthouse—along with the nearby Municipal Auditorium—as the “Pendergast Pyramid,” or that countless cartoons mocking the machine situated a caricature of the boss atop the blunt monolith of City Hall.<sup>231</sup> By the mid-1930s, concrete was as much a shorthand for machine power as was election fraud and tax fixing—a reality apparent in the copious reform-minded cartoons and articles in the *Kansas City Star*, *Citizens’ League Bulletin*, and *Future*. *Future* even offered poetry that highlighted that mocked the boss’ most iconic business:

We’re on top  
We’re the old tax fixers  
We’re on top  
We’re the concrete mixers.<sup>232</sup>

These buildings also allowed Pendergast to round out his spatial and architectural project. If 1908 Main had established him as a humble business owner accessible to the people, and his Ward Parkway mansion had made him appear a prosperous suburbanite, City Hall exerted his sheer political thrust. He might have been, these buildings suggested, in turn an approachable man as well as a genteel one, yet he was also a powerful one. Most important, his power was synonymous with the city and its destiny.

While many drew a line of connection between the machine and the boss’s concrete company, none pointed out that the company’s methods were an eerie parallel to those that were coloring the machine’s new era. “The Red-D-Mix system,” puffed one advertisement, “is ideal, as it allows the

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<sup>228</sup> Quoted in Milligan, *Missouri Waltz*, 37.

<sup>229</sup> “Sculptural Frieze Banding the New City Hall Will Depict Kansas City’s Early History,” *Kansas City Star* (November 15, 1936), in Mounted Clipping, folder 41.1; Native Sons of Kansas City Scrapbooks, SHSMO-KC.

<sup>230</sup> Ehrlich, *Kansas City, Missouri: An Architectural History*, 100-101.

<sup>231</sup> See “First Ward to Ward Parkway,” *Future* 1, no. 10 (March 15, 1935): 3.

<sup>232</sup> “Who’s the Top?” *Future* 1, no. 11 (March 22, 1935): 2.

material to be used without loss or delay and keeps everything clean and free from unsightly piles of material and consequent waste.”<sup>233</sup> That key concept—of confining the unsightly and heightening the sense of convenience, accessibility, and functionality, all to achieve an unprecedented degree of presence—was not merely an aspect of Ready Mixed’s adaptation to the 1920s consumer market. So too did it describe the tactics of Kansas City’s stylized and intractable political machine.

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When pushed about the city’s persistent crime and corruption, Kansas City’s leaders retorted that such disorders were a hallmark of urban life. New York and Chicago, after all, boasted legendary levels of crime and vice, as did smaller cities like Seattle and Cincinnati.<sup>234</sup> Yet those two latter places, the *Citizens League Bulletin* quickly pointed out, had been “cleaned” by successful reform campaigns that had ousted their boss rule and eradicated their vice industries. Nearby, Omaha had seen a similar effort that had shuttered the city’s red-light district and most of its sixteen hundred illegal saloons.<sup>235</sup> Perhaps the clearest retort came from Oklahoma City, another important city in the industrial Southwest: “The underworld of Oklahoma City, compared with that of Kansas City, is lily white,” several of its city leaders wrote. “There are no gambling dens or bookie shops; no punchboards or horse dice clutter cigar counters. No beer joints with blaring bands and so-called hostesses lin[ing] the streets; no ‘north end.’ No ‘Big Tom’ nor ‘Big Cas.’ No 3.2 beer joints with whiskey lining the back bar. No large concrete companies.”<sup>236</sup>

In 1929, a journalist had written that Kansas Citians seemed “proud of their own indifference” to machine control and corruption—a comment that perhaps made sense given the decade’s destabilization of morality, particularly at it concerned urban life.<sup>237</sup> Yet by most accounts, any pride in Kansas City’s machine control had transubstantiated into pure fear by the mid-1930s. “The unholy alliance between crime and politics,” wrote one concerned resident, “has become so powerful that citizens of Kansas City who desire to free their city from machine rule must look to other communities in the State for aid.”<sup>238</sup> That was a typical perspective, and one given credence by a federal grand jury report that explained the extent of corruption in the municipal government: “The whole situation [in Kansas City] . . . is one we believe is undoubtedly known to and permitted by many men holding places of high authority and continues down to and includes many men holding minor offices.” And that situation, continued the report, was a hard one to piece together. “This jury,” after all, “has been greatly handicapped by the fear of witnesses to tell the truth.”<sup>239</sup>

Kansas Citians had countless reasons to fear the machine, but a 1935 story in the local weekly *Future* suggests the depth of intimidation and the shameless extent of corruption. The paper reported that city undertaker Peter B. Lapentina, who was contracted to bury the unclaimed dead for \$15 per corpse, had made a habit of absconding with bodies from the General Hospital before family members could arrive to do the proper claiming. The rightful reclaiming of a body, of course, would demand a handsome fee—\$65 in some cases. And Lapentina, the article makes plain, was synonymous with Pendergast—a reality it colored by invoking the old Latin stanza on youth and death:

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<sup>233</sup> *Kansas City Journal-Post* (December 31, 1929).

<sup>234</sup> See “City Manager Plan,” *Future* 1, no. 23: 4; “Seattle, Too,” *Citizens’ League Bulletin* 6, no. 688 (November 16, 1935): 42; “In Seattle, Not Kansas City,” *Citizens’ League Bulletin* 8, no. 692 (December 14, 1935): 60.

<sup>235</sup> Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 100.

<sup>236</sup> “Note from Oklahoma,” *Future* 1, no. 5 (February 8, 1935): 2.

<sup>237</sup> Pegler, “In Spite of it All, Mr. Pendergast Runs a Good Town,” 13; Allen, *Only Yesterday*, 76-105.

<sup>238</sup> Russell F. Greiner; quoted in Reeves, “The Shame of a Great City,” 105.

<sup>239</sup> See Reeves, “The Shame of a Great City,” 108.

*Gaudeamus Igitur,  
Juventus dum sumus;  
Post jucundem juventutem  
Post molestem sevectutem  
Nos habebit humus.*

Therefore rejoice,  
While we are young;  
After a pleasant youth  
After a tempestuous old age  
The ground shall have us.

“Perhaps we should revise,” suggested the journalist. “*Nos Habebit Lapentina.*”<sup>240</sup> The same publication put it even more plainly a few weeks later: “Citizens die in Kansas City but they do not cease to vote for the King. [Its] invisible government does not even respect the dead.”<sup>241</sup>

### ***The Wide-Open Town***

The political juggernaut of Pendergast’s machine meant that the glamorous and modern elements of a sophisticated city—the skyscrapers, airport, and industrial districts—coexisted with one of the country’s most extensive landscapes of criminal-oriented vice. All cities had their vice districts, of course, but Kansas City’s proved to be formidable. “Rackets of all kinds flourish,” wrote a local judge. “Saloons boastingly proclaim, ‘We Never Close.’ Gambling houses operate without pretense of concealment. All the games contrived by the art of chance are there, on a scale of play to accommodate piker and plunger. The poor are quite as privileged to lose their money in Kansas City as the rich. The democracy of corruption knows no caste. The unbolted doors swing a welcome to everybody. Night clubs boom riotously. The oldest profession beckons boldly.”<sup>242</sup>

This reality led to some extreme comparisons. While “[t]he Bowery, the Barbary Coast, Chinatown, the Orient, Singapore and other notorious spots on the globe that have been in the spotlight of fact or fancy,” claimed police chief Lear Reed, “none of them had anything on Kansas City.”<sup>243</sup> Journalist Edward Morrow agreed. “[I]f you can see some sin, forget Paris and go to Kansas City. With the possible exception of such renowned centers as Singapore and Port Said, Kansas City has the greatest sin industry in the world.”<sup>244</sup>

There were justifications behind the hyperbole. While Kansas City was the farthest thing from a worldly entrepot, the city’s vice had grown to outlandish proportions for a city its size. The depth of Pendergast’s willpower to control the city—and his remarkable success at doing so—yielded a geography of vice that broke free from the city’s old spatial and social parameters. In most cities, owners of clubs, brothels, and gambling dens had to secure protection from individual police officers or machine-allied judges, but with Kansas City’s entire police force turning a blind eye to most

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<sup>240</sup> “Nos Habebit Lapentina,” *Future* 1, no. 16 (April 26, 1935): 1, 8.

<sup>241</sup> “The Strange Case of Dr. Gray,” *Future* 1, no. 18 (May 10, 1935): 8.

<sup>242</sup> Reeves, “The Shame of a Great City,” 29-30, 107.

<sup>243</sup> Lear B. Reed, *Human Wolves: Seventeen Years of War on Crime* (Kansas City, MO: Brown-White-Lowell Press, 1941), 190.

<sup>244</sup> Edward Morrow in the *Omaha World Herald*, quoted in Milligan, *Missouri Waltz*, 12.

violations (in exchange for payoffs, of course), proprietors were essentially free to expand into new corners of the city, so long as they were willing to pay tribute to the machine.<sup>245</sup> As it turned out, most were, for with that tribute came less and less oversight. And because most wards of the core were under the power of Pendergast's control by the late 1920s, those engaged in buttressing the machine were afforded more protections.

The net result of this system was a dramatic expansion of vice beyond the older immigrant and transient areas of the West Bottoms and the North End. By the mid-1920s, and certainly by the early 1930s, gambling and drinking spots had come to define multiple nodes of Kansas City's commercial and residential core. The immigrant-oriented North End remained a popular spot, but by 1925 it had been overpowered by the Twelfth Street corridor in the heart of downtown, the stretch of Eighteenth Street at the intersection of Vine Street, and several other major thoroughfares running out of downtown that boasted hole-in-the-wall bars, nightclubs of both the elegant and seedy type, and clandestine gambling dens. Even outlying streetcar nodes—often considered hubs of suburban respectability—had become as known for their “gambling salons” and violations of laws as for their upmarket shops, restaurants, and theaters by the mid-1930s. Vice in Interwar Kansas City, it seemed, catered to all types in all places. It was not for nothing that countless journalists characterized Kansas City as a “hot, wide-open town.”<sup>246</sup>

Of the city's myriad nightlife areas, the stretch of Twelfth Street running through and east of the downtown core was the acknowledged hub. “There's one thing,” reported the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, “that distinguishes Twelfth Street in downtown Kansas City from main streets in other towns. Jutting off its sidewalks and off the sidewalks of intersecting streets—in an area of about 15 square blocks—there are more than 500 bars.”<sup>247</sup> This downtown landscape, stocked with businesses like haberdashers, dentists, jewelers, shoe shops, and drug stores, was nonetheless a place where “what catches the eye are the rows and rows of neon and painted signs” advertising places to imbibe.<sup>248</sup>

Twelfth Street was the clear heir to the city's previous vice thoroughfares—the stretches of Union Avenue and Ninth Street in the West Bottoms opposite the Union Depot, whose hundreds of daily arrivals kept the area's “saloons, dance halls, variety shows, its gorgeous accommodations for the transaction of keno, faro, chuck-a-luck, roulette, and stud poker” rowdy with “joyous crudity.”<sup>249</sup> With the Depot's closure and the opening of the city's new Union Station just south of downtown in 1914, the transient energy once housed in the West Bottoms quickly shifted to the downtown stretch of Twelfth Street that was just a short walk or streetcar ride up Main Street from the new terminal. The next year, the opening of the Twelfth Street Viaduct made the downtown stretch of Twelfth the most directly connected thoroughfare to the industrial West Bottoms, whose packing houses, rail yards, and factories supplied a steady stream of workers to a street that, aside from being the main streetcar crossroads of the commercial core, quickly became the hub of vice.<sup>250</sup> Saloons, brothels, theaters, and nightclubs turned Twelfth into a commercial thoroughfare that, according to one historian, “carried the spirit of Old Battle Row and Union Avenue into the new metropolitan age.”<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>245</sup> See Sherry Lamb Schirmer, *A City Divided: The Racial Landscape of Kansas City, 1900-1960* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 167.

<sup>246</sup> “Night Life of the Mortals,” *Future 1* (March 29, 1935): 1.

<sup>247</sup> “Night Life in Kansas City,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (March 19, 1936), 3D.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*; See *Kansas City, Missouri, City Directories, 1925-1939*, MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>249</sup> Haskell, “Kansas City: Houn' Dawg vs. Art,” in Aikman, *The Taming of the Frontier*, 206.

<sup>250</sup> Edward A. Conrad, *Kansas City Streetcars: From Hayburners to Streamliners* (Blue Springs, MO: HeartlandRails Publishing Company, 2011), 156; See also Map Showing Kansas City Streetcar Routes; SC117, Series 4-1, Map #10, 1930, MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>251</sup> Reddig, *Tom's Town*, 67.



The migration of vice came with a new feel. Located one block south of the city's choicest shopping street, and nestled beneath the looming presence of tall buildings, Twelfth Street developed a much more centralized, urban sensibility than the ramshackle strips at the base of the bluffs, and consequently became, according to a journalist, the "playground, the social stage and the fairyland" of Kansas City.<sup>252</sup> For one local paper, this modernized street was also a hub for a more modernized structure of vice: "far different is this modern promenade of the chisseler from the gay days of the shoot-the-works swashbuckling gamblers, colorful cowboys and dance hall gals in short skirts."<sup>253</sup> It is no surprise that this emerging strip—home to several respectable establishments in its early days—was where an up-and-coming, saloon-keeping Tom Pendergast purchased his first dispensary from a Republican family, only to tilt its clientele and reputation towards a less upstanding vibe. In Pendergast's hands, the watering hole "continued to give excellent service and became political headquarters for the society dedicated to the cause of keeping reform away."<sup>254</sup>

And stay away it did. During the 1920s and '30s, as continued commercial build-up packed more and more businesses into its crowded blocks, Twelfth Street came to be Kansas City's rowdiest and most notorious thoroughfare—one all the more notable for its blend of the seedy with the legitimate. Retail outlets, hotels, and restaurants shared blocks with booking joints, gambling dens, cheap bars, sleazy theaters, nightclubs, and taxi-dance halls.<sup>255</sup>

For one local paper, Twelfth Street's daily cadence was the most revealing barometer of its character. By day, the race booking joints, gambling dens (called "'No Chance Casinos' by the wise ones"), and beer joints pulsed alongside the businesses, shops, and restaurants. Downtown shoppers and office workers kept the taxi stands, streetcars, and range of businesses busy, just as they did the "razor blade and shoestring peddlers" that peppered the scene.<sup>256</sup> That scene began to shift in the late afternoon, which saw "Kansas City's Bawdyway and Filch Avenue" come alive. "Night lifers" and out-of-towners began emerging from the area's hotels, rooming houses, and flophouses to imbibe, gamble, and catch the sight of nude women at the floor shows. And at night, when the chaperoning presence of downtown professionals was finally gone and the work-a-day businesses had closed, the strip took on its full range of "gaudy colors and noises." A cacophony of "three-piece orchestras, whining crooners and torch singers and radios" blared from the "dimly lit joints," and the semi-predictable pulse of the workday gave way to a manic cadence of crowds hopping from bar to bar, frequent fights, and steady streams of girls moving "up and down the street, more open in their solicitation as the night wears on." Prostitution, while allegedly "not confined to any section of the city," thrived in the heart of the business district where competition on any given evening was "especially brisk."<sup>257</sup> Multiple venues that were saloons by day became a hybrid of nightclub, taxi-dance hall, and brothel by night.

As a thoroughfare that mixed the "underworld tycoon and termite, the glib and gaudy, the dime store dips, dime-a-dance dames, prostitutes, peanut politicians and pimps, and precinct captains who 'handle' the dive collections," Twelfth boasted an appropriately motley cast. It included Harry Brewer, a blind bookie who "earned a fortune by never making a mathematical mistake or violating the code of fair play"; Gold Tooth Maxie, an ethical yet "indestructible craps shooter"; Johnnie Johnston, "the friendly fat man" who perched himself on the corner; and Tom Finnigan, the

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<sup>252</sup> "Fanfaronade," *Future* 1, no 17 (May 3, 1935): 3, 5.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>254</sup> Reddig, *Tom's Town*, 89.

<sup>255</sup> "Fanfaronade," *Future* 1, no 17 (May 3, 1935): 3, 5. See also *Kansas City, Missouri, City Directories, 1930-1935*, MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> "Night Clubs Provide Hostesses," *The Citizens League Bulletin* (January 12, 1935), 412.

“unofficial mayor of Twelfth Street” whose mantra was that “there was nothing higher than a sportsman’s honor and nothing more picturesque than a turf follower’s conversation.”<sup>258</sup> Yet as a street whose most boasted art was pickpocketing drunks, Twelfth was the only place in the city where “the chisseler [himself] is chissled [*sic*].” And all, thought reform-minded weekly *Future*, were chisselers at heart on Twelfth. In addition to the marble game operators, crooked croupiers, and political figures, it was the “chiselling bartenders” who were the top of the street’s social scale. “He looks upon the drinking public,” wrote a journalist, “as a bunch of chumps and gauges his efficiency on his ability to cheat the customers.”<sup>259</sup>

Twelfth Street was also the heart of the city’s infamous gambling industry. “[U]nbridled gambling of major proportions in almost every conceivable form and in most numerous quarters has ... been tolerated as a matter of general policy by more than one high official ..., and is running in a most wide-open fashion.”<sup>260</sup> That claim, offered by Judge Albert Reeves, was best illustrated by a stroll down Twelfth. No fewer than seven gambling dens, including the city’s largest, dotted the blocks between Baltimore and Oak, with venues like Baltimore Recreation, Stag, Twelfth Street Recreation, Empress, Dorty Edward Billiards, Gorman F. Paul Billiards, Shannon S. Hugh Billiards, and the Turf offering games of poker, blackjack, and craps, slot machines, and betting on baseball, football, and most prominently, horse racing.<sup>261</sup> When *Life* magazine profiled Kansas City in a 1938 photo essay titled “America Gambling,” Twelfth Street held center stage. And thanks to a stealth photographer hired from the *Kansas City Journal-Post*, readers even got a glimpse of the brightly-lit, spacious interiors, where men donning fedoras huddled around poker tables and stood along bars pondering the day’s tip sheets.<sup>262</sup> If the interiors were spartan, the profits were extravagant; Baltimore Recreation’s annual gross “take” was reputed to be \$1 million per year.<sup>263</sup>

As Twelfth Street ran eastward and the bustle and work-a-day commerce of downtown waned, the profile of nightlife and vice grew. The intersection of Twelfth and Cherry featured a prominent cluster of nightclubs that included the Reno, Amos and Andy, Greenleaf Gardens, the Hey-Hay Club—places where the city’s famous jazz scene unfolded on a nightly basis.<sup>264</sup> The area was also a hub for liquor shops, with five dotting the block of Twelfth between Cherry and Holmes alone.<sup>265</sup> The area’s most illicit activity, however, was prostitution, which was a fixture of the Cherry and Locust intersections as well as the stretch of Fourteenth Street just two blocks to the south. An anti-vice survey in 1937 indicated some fifty places in Kansas City that operated openly as houses of prostitution, and many were clustered in this area, including one particularly packed stretch of Fourteenth Street. Attempts by machine-backed city officials to push the “prostitutes’ paradise” further towards Troost Avenue after the construction of City Hall and the Jackson County Courthouse in 1937 had been largely unsuccessful, and the brothels’ “inmates” continued to solicit students from the local junior college located only two blocks away.<sup>266</sup> If students felt harassed, the prostitutes rarely

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<sup>258</sup> Reddig, *Tom’s Town*, 164-165.

<sup>259</sup> “Fanfaronade,” *Future* 1, no 17 (May 3, 1935): 3, 5.

<sup>260</sup> Merrill E. Otis, quoted in Reeves, “The Shame of a Great City,” 104.

<sup>261</sup> *Kansas City, Missouri, City Directories*, 1935-1939, MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>262</sup> “America Gambling: Half of the Nation Made Bets in 1938,” *Life* (February 6, 1939), 45.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>264</sup> Ross Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 18-19.

<sup>265</sup> *Kansas City, Missouri, City Directories*, 1930-1939, MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>266</sup> “Move Over, Girls, the Machine’s Moving In,” *Future* 1, no. 8 (March 8, 1935): 3.

“Police Economy and Efficiency,” *Citizens’ League Bulletin* 6, no. 760 (June 5, 1937): 343; Mayerberg, *Chronicle of an American Crusader*, 117.

felt so. “Day and night” they remained “unmolested” by law enforcement, affirmed one reform-minded rabbi.<sup>267</sup>

If the “fanfaronade” of Twelfth Street functioned as the rough northern boundary of Kansas City’s highest concentration of nightlife, the intersection of Eighteenth and Vine Streets was the southern terminus of Kansas City’s primary nightlife area. Unlike the Twelfth Street corridor, the area around Eighteenth and Vine was the commercial heart of a residential area—one that had come to house a substantial portion of Kansas City’s blacks, whose population had begun to swell considerably with newcomers from the south beginning in the early ‘20s. Increased anxiety from Kansas City’s white homeowners made for a more circumscribed black ghetto, and by 1925 the neighborhoods radiating off of the Vine Street commercial strip expressed the full range of incomes and lifestyles that St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton would famously describe in their landmark 1945 work *Black Metropolis*.

While the Eighteenth and Vine area contained both prim homes of black professionals, crowded, tenement-like apartment buildings, and everything in between, the area’s most definitive feature was a lineup of nightclubs that courted the talents of the city’s many black musicians.<sup>268</sup> Tucked in among the haberdashers, drug stores, theaters, and restaurants were clubs like the Subway Club, the Paseo Tap Room, Old Kentucky Bar-B-Q, and the Gold Crown Tap Room—venues that were regarded in particular for the feverish melodies that emanated from the city’s finest house orchestras.

Whether on Twelfth, Eighteenth or on any of the many proximal thoroughfares that anchored Kansas City’s nightlife industry, the nightclub was the quintessential establishment. (Figure 10) Figures vary, but conservative estimates suggest that the city’s streets were home to between three and five hundred saloons, bars, and nightclubs—a statistic that suggested that Kansas City, with some five-hundred thousand residents in 1930, had more nightclubs per capita than any other American city.<sup>269</sup> It is no wonder that Count Basie spoke so hyperbolically when he recalled the ‘30s landscape: “Clubs, clubs, clubs, clubs, clubs, clubs, clubs. As a matter of fact, I thought that was all Kansas City was made up of, was clubs.”<sup>270</sup>

That landscape had its roots in the early 1920s, when Kansas City was a living example of Will Rogers’ joke that “Prohibition is better than no liquor at all.” Throughout the decade, Kansas City had the reputation for being one of the most booze-friendly towns in the country. Speakeasies were abundant and far from clandestine, illegal production was well-established in the “chicken dinner farms” on the city’s outskirts, and Johnny Lazia ran a \$5-million-a-year bootlegging operation that supplied many of the city’s joints with liquor.<sup>271</sup> And despite the egregious infractions, not a single felony conviction for violating Prohibition laws appeared in Kansas City’s court proceedings.<sup>272</sup> This

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<sup>267</sup> Mayerberg, *Chronicle of an American Crusader*, 117; *Kansas City Star* (January 24, 1993).

<sup>268</sup> Asa Martin, *Our Negro Population: A Sociological Study of the Negroes of Kansas City, Missouri* (Kansas City: Franklin Hudson Publishing Company, 1913), 90, 102-103.

<sup>269</sup> “Night Life of the Mortals,” *Future 1* (March 29, 1935): 1; see also Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 19; Nathan W. Pearson, Jr., “Political and Musical Forces That Influenced the Development of Kansas City Jazz,” *Black Music Research Journal* 9 (Autumn 1989), 181-182. Kansas City, Missouri, had approximately 400,000 residents in the 1930 Census, and Kansas City, Kansas, a separate municipality but adjacent municipality, counted approximately 120,000.

<sup>270</sup> Count Basie, interview by Nathan Pearson and Howard Litwak, February 27, 1977, transcript, folder 6, 12. Kansas City Jazz Oral History Collection (K0012); SHSMO, KC.

<sup>271</sup> Dorsett, *The Pendergast Machine*, 87-88; “Johnny Lazia is Exonerated,” *Kansas City American*, September 24, 1931, 1, cited in Frank Driggs and Chuck Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz: From Ragtime to Bebop—A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9; Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 8. For descriptions of liquor production on chicken dinner farms, see *Kansas City Times* (July 4, 1923; July 26, 1923), *Kansas City Star* (July 18, 1923), and “Mr. Webb Voices a Kick,” (u.d.), all in “Crime,” Mounted Clippings File (1900-1949), MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>272</sup> Pearson, “Political and Musical Forces that Influenced the Development of Kansas City Jazz,” 181.

sort of economy meant that the repeal of Prohibition in late 1933 did not require a substantial and awkward remaking of distribution and dispensing networks; existing lines of trade and sales merely switched over to legitimate operations.<sup>273</sup> It is no wonder that Kansas City was on the radar of Parisian doctor George G. Valot, who ventured to America shortly after the repeal of Prohibition in 1934 to capture the status of America's reentry into legal liquor production. "The wettest towns in America," he concluded at the end of his research trip, "are Reno, Nev.; New Orleans, and Kansas City, Mo."<sup>274</sup>

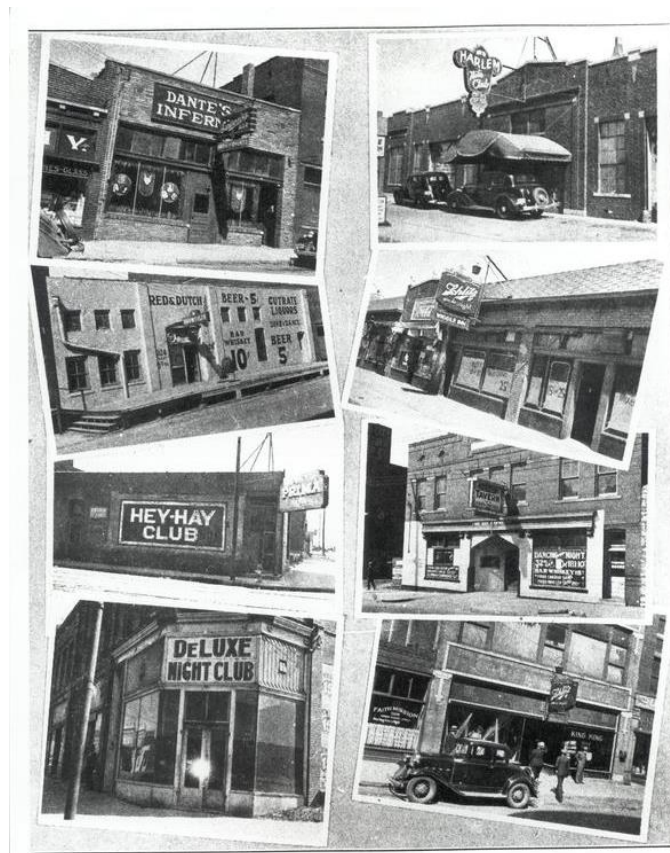


Figure 10: A collage of Kansas City nightclub exteriors from the early 1930s.

*David E. Dexter, Jr. Collection*

*Kenneth J. LaBudde Special Collections, University of Missouri-Kansas City (hereafter LSC, UMKC)*

The passage of the Twenty-First Amendment did not mean, however, that all of the flavors of Prohibition-era vice in Kansas City were discarded. After 1933, the majority of Kansas City's bars and clubs stuck to their old ways. "Speakeasies and joints are more flagrant in their abuse of the liquor laws than they were at any time during prohibition," claimed J. B. Martin, president of the Kansas City Retail Beer and Liquor Dealers' Association in 1935.<sup>275</sup> He was right. While hotel bars and a handful of other reputable, non-machine establishments followed liquor sales and licensing laws, the majority of Kansas City's legendary watering holes did not. Martin estimated that of the over two thousand

<sup>273</sup> Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 9.

<sup>274</sup> Quoted in the *St. Joseph News-Press*, in turn quoted in Matt Pearce, "Summoning Spirits: A Brief History of Kansas City Speakeasies," *The Pitch* (May 9, 2012).

<sup>275</sup> "Liquor License Legend," *Future* 1, no. 18 (May 10, 1935): 3.

establishments dispensing hard liquor, less than three hundred were operating with a hard liquor license. A local paper offered an even higher estimate, suggesting that 2,700 bars and clubs were dispensing hard liquor while possessing the inexpensive \$37.50 beer dispensing license rather than the legitimate \$1,050 license permitting hard liquor sales.<sup>276</sup>

Laws regulating operating hours were also widely ignored, with many establishments remaining open after midnight and serving all day on Sunday—infractions that essentially meant that one could drink twenty four hours a day and seven days a week in Kansas City. “No attempt to enforce the provisions of the new state liquor law is being made here,” wrote *Future* in May 1935. “The new law provides for closing at midnight Saturdays and at 1:30 o’clock in the morning other days. Of the hundreds of bars in Kansas City, “not more than half a dozen places have been found that observe the law.”<sup>277</sup> On Sundays in particular, prospective patrons of establishments like the restaurant of the elegant Hotel Muehlebach would divert to a seedier joints. “A diner goes into the hotel Sunday night, asks for a drink. He is told there is a Sunday closing law. The diner picks up his hat, takes his friends and goes across the street where they sell all the time.”<sup>278</sup> The pressure was so bad that legitimate dealers were often forced to violate the law themselves to match the illegal competition.

Violations were so widespread and so frequent that the city’s reform-oriented publications mocked the naive politicians in Jefferson City who trumpeted liquor regulations. When an assistant attorney general ruled that the after-hours delivery of liquor sold prior to the closing hour violated the law, one paper wondered if he “is crazy or just facetious. Why worry about this fine point of the law when there is no observance of the law whatever except by a very few bars that do not cater to the machine?”<sup>279</sup> This tone became typical in anti-machine journalism, including the *Kansas City Star* and *Kansas City Call*, the city’s black newspaper. While bills passing through the halls of Jefferson City threatened to crack down on Kansas City’s flagrant disregard for the law, Pendergast’s influence there and the permissive role of the Kansas City police force meant that the laws would be as meaningless as Prohibition had been. “The bill now in the state legislature,” observed *Future* regarding a new regulatory proposal, “will put some teeth in the law but what the situation lacks most here is a few molars in the enforcement.”<sup>280</sup>

The distinction of being known as one of America’s wettest cities did not make for high quality. The illegitimate conditions of Kansas City’s vice—coupled with the fact that most bars existed merely to funnel money into the pockets of Pendergast and his cronies—made for a landscape defined by pervasive mediocrity. While there were “handsomely decorated barrooms,” “chaste night clubs where waltzes are actually played,” and “restaurants known the country over,” the “run of the mills places ... where people go after midnight” were only exceptional, thought one major out-of-town newspaper, for their abundance.<sup>281</sup> A local publication gave a damning, if accurate, portrait of the city’s ubiquitous watering holes: “The majority of these spots are small, obscure and ephemeral [*sic*], stemming directly from speakeasies. They are so much alike in decor, entertainment, choice of beverages and patrons that only the name distinguishes one from the other. Take an old store room, several bolts of black, red or blue tarlatan, several cans of silver radiator paint, a secondhand bar and a ditto bartender and you have the makings of the average second class Kansas City night club.”<sup>282</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> “Closing,” *Future* 1, no. 21 (May 21, 1935): 2.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.; “They Really Closed Them,” *Future* 1, no. 26 (July 5, 1935): 3.

<sup>279</sup> “Hasn’t He Heard?” *Future* 1, no. 24 (June 28, 1935): 8.

<sup>280</sup> “Liquor License Legend,” *Future* 1, no. 18 (May 10, 1935): 3.

<sup>281</sup> “Night Life in Kansas City,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (March 19, 1936), 3D.

<sup>282</sup> “Night Life of the Mortals,” *Future* 1 (March 29, 1935): 1.

Another paper confirmed that the typical nightclub was a one-room establishment, “bare or decorated in poor taste,” with nothing more than “an ordinary saloon bar.”<sup>283</sup>

Many proprietors attempted to differentiate their otherwise indistinguishable businesses through theming. At such establishments, inconspicuous facades concealed interiors that were often comically, kitschily, or luridly styled.<sup>284</sup> At the Hey-Hay, a speakeasy opened in a converted barn in the North End by bootlegger and machine crony Milton Morris, patrons sat on bales of hay while musicians donned red bandannas and performed on a bandstand made from the flatbed of a hay wagon.<sup>285</sup> Morris employed a similar scheme in his Novelty Club at Sixteenth and McGee; upturned wine casks served as tables and old-fashioned street lanterns swung from the rafters.<sup>286</sup> Another venue, remembers jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams, was decorated to look like the inside of a prison, “with bars on the windows and waiters in striped uniforms like down-South convicts.”<sup>287</sup>

If these clubs played on the themes that resonated with the illicit theme of Prohibition, those that opened after the repeal tended to express more lavish and exotic themes. The black-serving Cherry Blossom—a bar where Count Basie and his band played regularly—was decorated in Japanese style, and featuring a “beautiful little brown-skinned waitress.”<sup>288</sup> And while the majority of clubs, according to Mary Lou Williams, were “clean ... but not anything classy,” a handful of popular spots veered towards risqué and even explicit themes.<sup>289</sup> Dante’s Inferno, a mob-owned establishment in a “small building” with an even “smaller entrance” on Independence Avenue, was fashioned to appear like a hellish grotto whose walls were decorated by “a lurid red substance which must be as inflammable as the flames of hell it symbolizes.”<sup>290</sup> The decor also featured fire-breathing dragons, cartoonish effigies of devils hanging from the walls and ceiling, and waitresses in themed attire—“red velvet shorts and satin tops, a skull cap with little satin horns on it,” recalls entertainer and waitress Edna Minitini. “We [also] had tails.”<sup>291</sup> Even the menus were red, rounding out a theme of feverish color that was an ironic contrast to the modern air-conditioning that nearly every ad trumpeted (“a hot time in a cool place”).<sup>292</sup>

While its decor was one-of-a-kind, Dante’s Inferno offered the standard nightly lineup found in most of Kansas City’s clubs. (Figure 11) Patrons could rely on three shows per night, with an extra show on Saturdays. By today’s standards, shows were late. Well-known emcee Eli Madlof would introduce the house orchestra and first act around ten or eleven, and the final shows would not begin until three or four at the earliest. These floor shows reliably featured a varied lineup of entertainers. Drag queens, song and piano duos, tap dancers, and vaudevillians were all part of the typical lineup. And while many were one-off acts, others made regular appearances. Dante’s Inferno, for instance, featured the Lynn sisters (“harmony deluxe”), as well as some of the city’s best known reputable

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<sup>283</sup> “Night Life in Kansas City,” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (March 19, 1936), 3D.

<sup>284</sup> Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 19.

<sup>285</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 7. See John Albertson, “Stores of Uncle Milt Live On,” *Jazz Ambassador Magazine* (October/November 1992): 17.

<sup>286</sup> Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 19. Russell cites a 1969 interview with Milton Morris by Richard Dickert. See Russell, 251n8.

<sup>287</sup> Quoted in Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya*, 288.

<sup>288</sup> Quoted in Shapiro and Hentoff, eds., *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya*, 292.

<sup>289</sup> Cited in Nathan W. Pearson, Jr., *Goin’ to Kansas City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 111.

<sup>290</sup> “Night Life of the Mortals,” *Future 1* (March 29, 1935): 8.

<sup>291</sup> Quoted in Pearson, *Goin’ to Kansas City*, 102.

<sup>292</sup> See Scrapbooks 1 and 2, Edna Mae Whithouse Collection, Kansas Collection, RH MS Q261, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries.

female impersonators for its Tuesday-night drag shows.<sup>293</sup> Gambling was also on offer as an entertainment in most nightclubs. Many had at least a dice or card game tucked away in one corner for the “drunks who got the gambling urge out of their cups.”<sup>294</sup> Some bars even harbored hidden rooms that functioned as makeshift casinos.



Figure 11: The interior of Dante’s Inferno—one of the few interior photographs of any of Kansas City’s nightclubs.  
*Edna Mae Whithouse Papers, Photographs, Box 1, Folder 36*  
*Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas (hereafter KSRL, KU)*

If spots like Dante’s Inferno were merely suggestive, others were downright explicit. When columnist Westbrook Pegler compared Kansas City to Paris by citing a “restaurant ... where the waitresses wear nothing on before and a little less than half of that behind,” he was alluding to the Chesterfield Club at Ninth and Oak Streets.<sup>295</sup> Indeed, the staff of four waitresses at the Chesterfield wore nothing but high heels and cellophane aprons—outfits designed to highlight the playing card suits shaved from each woman’s pubic hair.<sup>296</sup> Venues like this were popular spots not only for late night shows, but for business lunches and afternoon meetings. Their place in the daily life of Kansas City was significant enough that Thomas Hart Benton included a scene of scantily clad dancers entertaining businessmen in his Kansas City vignette of his 1936 *A Social History of the State of Missouri* in the capitol building in Jefferson City. When confronted by protesting church groups that objected this lewd inclusion, Benton was direct in his retort: “I’ve been to many business men’s parties here [in

<sup>293</sup> See Scrapbooks 1 and 2, Edna Mae Whithouse Collection, Kansas Collection, RH MS Q261, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries (hereafter KSRL, KU).

<sup>294</sup> “Patriots, Go to Riverside,” *Future* 1, no. 20 (May 24, 1935): 2.

<sup>295</sup> Pegler, “In Spite of it All, Mr. Pendergast Runs a Good Town,” 13.

<sup>296</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 7; Pearson, *Goin’ to Kansas City*, 100.

Kansas City] ... and I want to tell you I put considerable clothes on her.”<sup>297</sup> And the Chesterfield was not even the most risqué. At other venues, acts included far more than nudity, and were even known to include lewd acts involving animals.

If the majority of Kansas City’s clubs and bars were middling at best, the alcohol was often repulsive.<sup>298</sup> Patrons could enjoy a full range of fine bourbons, scotches, wines, and mixed cocktails in hotel bars and high profile establishments, but the city’s ubiquitous “little unlovely places” reliably served bad booze and cheap beer.<sup>299</sup> At the Hey-Hay Club, patrons paid a dime for 26-ounce schooners of beer that, according to one patron, “tasted of soap, ether, sour mash and, oddly enough, onions.”<sup>300</sup> Other places served liquor “as weak as it was vile.” If this seemed like a throwback to Prohibition, it was. “A large number of the joints in Kansas City are just as much bootlegging joints as they were before repeal,” quipped a local paper. Even after Prohibition, bootlegged liquor was still the drink of choice for patrons and bartenders alike. The most popular beverage was Crawford County corn whiskey, originally brewed by Sicilian miners in Kansas during the 1920s. While “the taste for it persists,” reported one local publication, “[i]t is [also] economical to dispense, powerful in action and tastes enough like rye, bourbon and Scotch to pass for any of the three if doctored a little.”<sup>301</sup> “They peddle corn liquor and North End hooch,” another article said of the bartenders. “Smart is the bartender who keeps two or three good brands of whisky on the bar and is able to fool the customer by selling him rotten bilge.”<sup>302</sup> Indeed, ordering a 25-cent “Scotch” highball at one of the second rate establishments often produced a dose of “Crawford County corn” laced with lemon peel and sweet soda.<sup>303</sup>

While bartenders dispensed subpar booze, owners often doled out abuse and violence, usually in response to gratuitous rowdiness. Proprietors often frisked patrons for guns, and just as often resorted to violence to deal with disagreeable or nonconforming customers. When a group of young journalists embarked on a night out in 1935 to survey the city’s landscape of clubs, they witnessed one club owner “stamp on the face of a noisy guest before [throwing] him out.” Later, at the Sportsman Club, they arrived shortly after “two men had been shot and killed by the proprietor, a fact that did not in any way increase or decrease the dead level of entertainment offered us there.”<sup>304</sup>

If Kansas City’s landscape of vice and corruption was often cruel to the underbelly of urban society and the desperado criminals who sought refuge there, so too was it unforgiving for many of the prairie folk who sought to escape the rural life through its financial and carnal opportunities. One night at the Chesterfield Club, one of the chorus line girls begged the madam to be excused from the night’s show, having just spied her brother in the crowd. “I’m from the country ... and my family thinks I’m working as a secretary,” she explained. After the madam granted her request and the girl had dressed and was headed for the exit, the Club’s crony managers intercepted her, eventually knocking her to the ground after she refused their orders to resume her place on stage. The scene aroused a cattleman patron to come to her rescue, and after he had given the manager a taste of his

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<sup>297</sup> “Benton’s Murals Stir a New Storm,” *Lawrence Daily-World Journal* (March 1, 1937), 3.

<sup>298</sup> Such was the case with most Prohibition era booze. See Laurence Bergreen, *Capone: The Man and the Era* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 130-131.

<sup>299</sup> Pusateri’s New Yorker at 1104 Baltimore, for instance, had a full range of bourbons, cocktails, fizzes, cordials, scotches, wines, and beers; Scrapbook 1, Edna Mae Whithouse Collection, Kansas Collection, RH MS Q261, KSRL, KU.

<sup>300</sup> “Night Life of the Mortals,” *Future 1* (March 29, 1935): 8.

<sup>301</sup> “Night Life of the Mortals,” *Future 1* (March 29, 1935): 8.

<sup>302</sup> “Fanfaronade,” *Future 1*, no 17 (May 3, 1935): 3.

<sup>303</sup> “Night Life of the Mortals,” *Future 1* (March 29, 1935): 8.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*



own medicine, the crony staff descended on him. After they “knocked him to pieces,” the Police Department collected the corpse and delivered it over the river to Kansas City, Kansas, where it was listed as a hit-and-run victim. “That was the way that the cattleman’s life was ended,” confirmed investigator William Becker. “We learned about that incident, and it was typical.”<sup>305</sup>

Not all venues were of the cramped and lurid sort; some were large, served good food, and catered to large crowds. A good example was Old Kentucky Bar-B-Q, “the bright spot of Kansas City” located in the heart of the Eighteenth and Vine area. Owned by well-regarded Joe Jacobs, one of the city’s best-known club owners, Old Kentucky Bar-B-Q was larger than most Kansas City venues, featuring not only a spacious dance floor, a long bar, and plenty of seating for diners to enjoy the spicy barbecue dinners, but also a second floor balcony whose tables offered clear views of the activity below.

As one of the only venues in Kansas City in which the house orchestra played nightly, Old Kentucky Bar-B-Q became one of the hotspots where patrons flocked to hear Woody Walders and His Swingsters, the “badmen of rhythm” who followed the song-and-dance numbers, torch acts, and other entertainments that began every evening at midnight. Liquor and music flowed late into the evening in most Kansas City bars, but Old Kentucky Bar-B-Q represented the echelon of venue where the free-flowing liquor and energy seemed to transubstantiate into a unique musical creativity. The venue was known for the city’s famous jam sessions in which musicians would play in a musical tug-of-war for hours, and the spot became a regular for touring musicians. “All visiting celebrities in the entertainment world,” wrote a local paper, “makes [sic] the Kentucky at least once during their stay in the city.”<sup>306</sup>

Old Kentucky BBQ also underscored one of the benefits of vice for the black community: the employment opportunities it offered blacks in an economy where they were increasingly barred from jobs. In 1929, only a quarter of businesses in Kansas City would hire blacks, and many black workers found jobs in the sectors of transportation and factory work, especially in packing houses. The majority of the city’s 23,000 black workers, however, found work in domestic and public service jobs, a sector in which nightclubs and bars became a reliable and growing employment option as the Depression diminished the employment prospects of black wage earners and many upper-middle class whites started forgoing hired service thanks to new, time-saving appliances.<sup>307</sup> As job opportunities in private homes and hotels declined, popular and crowded clubs like Old Kentucky Bar-B-Q continued to hire not only black musicians, but also cooks, waitresses, and bartenders. And unlike employment in far-flung factories or suburban neighborhoods, these jobs were at least in close proximity to the black neighborhoods.

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When journalists wrote of Kansas City as a “wide-open town,” they were not simply describing the pervasive nightlife that characterized the city’s inner core. They were also taking note of the bars and

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<sup>305</sup> Biographical Interview, William Becker, by Fredrick Spletstoser, April 17, 21; May 12; June 16; July 7, 9, 1989; Western District Archives; quoted in Lawrence H. Larsen and Nancy J. Hulston, “Criminal Aspects of the Pendergast Machine,” *Missouri Historical Review* 91, no. 2 (January 1997): 175. Becker eventually served as the Judge for the United States District Court for the Western District of Missouri from 1961 to 1977.

<sup>306</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 204; “Kentucky Bar-B-Q Closes Doors” and “Kentucky Barbecue Floor Show Tops Night Life Revue,” both in RH MS Q261.1, Scrapbook 1, Edna Mae Whithouse Papers, KSRL, KU.

<sup>307</sup> Coulter, *Take Up the Black Man’s Burden*, 274; Rick Halpern and Roger Horowitz, *Meatpackers: An Oral History of Black Packinghouse Workers and Their Struggle for Racial and Economic Equality* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), 65.

especially the gambling dens and machines that dotted the city's streetcar suburbs and far-flung commercial districts.

In a city where lax policing made for a virtual *laissez-faire* policy towards gambling, gambling den owners and slot machine racketeers alike branched out far beyond Twelfth Street gambling dens and night club back rooms to court new markets. When a local paper reported that “gambling houses are now wide open and slot machines are almost too numerous to count,” they were referring to a geography that included reputable establishments, legitimate businesses, and suburban areas.<sup>308</sup> One of downtown's most prominent hotels, for instance, ran a ring “day and night” on its sixth floor, and when a journalist set out to investigate, the elevator attendant took no effort to cover up the illicit venue: “To the game?” he asked. “Well, good luck.”<sup>309</sup>

Beyond the core, wide-open gambling was most apparent in the pervasive presence of slot machines. Setting up any sort of gambling device in Missouri was a felony punishable by up to five years in prison, but by all accounts, slots could be found in every corner of Kansas City.<sup>310</sup> Tucked behind the counters of cigar shops and liquor stores, they were also common features of pharmacies, five-and-dimes, lunch counters, and corner shops, where they courted the attention not only of men, but of women and children as well, all of whom, thought a local paper, were “victims of the gambling craze.”<sup>311</sup> “One hundred patrons were recently counted in a wide open gambling house and sixty of them were women.” That description was written in 1935 at the peak of a national gambling craze precipitated by the loss of faith in traditional markets and the desperation to make money in light of a lack of jobs. “It was the best year the gambling fraternity has ever known in the ranks of the professional easy-money men. There was ... no falling off in the patronage of the betting masses whose wholesale betting gave evidence of a greater faith in gamblers than in bankers.”<sup>312</sup>

Slot machines also happened to be Kansas City's most profitable and pervasive racket. Kansas Citians pumped some \$8 million into the city's hundreds of machines on an annual basis during the '30s, meaning that the racketeering syndicate reaped handsome benefits.<sup>313</sup> In theory, the breakdown was simple. Players had on average a one-in-ten chance of winning. The machines cost \$125 per year to lease, and commissions were paid to the renters. Slot machine owners would send out agents to unlock machines, count receipts, and pay a quarter of the profits to the renters of the machine, a quarter “for protection” from Pendergast, and half to the machine owners. But that was not to say that the business owner, the political machine, and the syndicate were on equal footing. “It is stated that the power of the syndicate is so great that a prospective keeper of the machine is not at liberty to refuse to have it in his place of business. Should he refuse, he is liable to [receive] discipline from the ‘invisible government.’”<sup>314</sup> The paper then offered a more realistic breakdown: “Machines in Kansas City are said to yield 10 per cent to the player and 90 per cent to the machine.”<sup>315</sup> And “regardless of

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<sup>308</sup> “Police Economy and Efficiency,” *Citizens' League Bulletin* 6, no. 760 (June 5, 1937): 343.

<sup>309</sup> “Gambling a Major Industry,” *The Citizens' League Bulletin* (January 12, 1935), 411; Church lotteries were allegedly, by polls, the most popular venue for gambling during the 1930s. See “America Gambling,” 45.

<sup>310</sup> Revised Statutes of Missouri, 1929, §4287; reprinted in *Citizens' League Bulletin* (November 9, 1935): 38.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*; “Gambling Hurts Business,” *Citizens' League Bulletin* 6, no. 714 (May 16, 1936): 147; C. C. Nicolet, “Kansas City Has Become a National Crime Capital,” *Columbia Missourian*, u.d. In “Crime,” Mounted Clippings File (1900-1949), MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>312</sup> “Gambling Hurts Business,” *Citizens' League Bulletin* 6, no. 714 (May 16, 1936): 147.

<sup>313</sup> Nicolet, “Kansas City Has Become a National Crime Capital.”

<sup>314</sup> “Slot Machine Syndicate,” *Citizens' League Bulletin* 6, no. 694 (December 28, 1935): 67.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*

the fact that the cards are stacked against them, and that the operators make big profits, animated groups of men and boys, and sometimes women, crowd around the gambling places.”<sup>316</sup>

Gambling in the farther-flung areas of the core was not limited to slots. “In recent weeks,” wrote a local paper in March 1935, “scores of business-like little gambling salons have broken out over the city like a rash.”<sup>317</sup> The spread was the result of slow activity at the core gambling dens in the wake of the Depression’s darkest days—a reality that prompted owners to pursue new markets. Outlying streetcar districts were an obvious place to court new patrons, and new spots opened up along Troost Avenue at Thirty-First Street, along the stretch of Westport Road just east of the Kansas state border, and, in the most substantial new agglomeration, at the intersection of Main and Thirty-Ninth Streets, where a new crop of machine- and mob-backed “salons” presented a new echelon of gambling hall.

Far posher than the spartan venues downtown, these spots took the gambling den to a new level of decorum—key for courting a suburban population for which ambiance was a necessary bargaining chip for rendezvousing with Lady Luck. Of the four prominent “salons” at Thirty-Ninth and Main, the 3925 Club was rumored to be the most profitable. Tucked in the upstairs above a dime store at its eponymous Main Street address, 3925 was a “modernistic racing salon” that also ran two “large dice games with a heavy play.” And despite being far from the downtown action, the venue flaunted its similar disregard for closing laws: the door and paraphernalia advertised the hours: “open ‘til ?” Quite unlike the congested casinos downtown, 3925 boasted relief from the summer heat. In the summer of 1935, the club’s owners even extended the fun onto the building’s rooftop to create a “garden casino” where the “gambling dilettanti” could partake in dice and card games on warm nights, and thus be “given the opportunity to mix romance with disappointment.” That sense of whimsy was also a feature around the corner at the Rialto, the most “flashy” and “deluxe” of these new venues that featured a street-level entry hung with velvet curtains.<sup>318</sup>

Yet the most striking of the new venues was Fortune, a “skill ball salon” on the second floor above Prices Drug Store whose feminized description was coupled with “an atmosphere of refinement and comfort.” Opened in 1934 by prominent mobster Charles Carrollo, Fortune specialized in a bingo-like game and featured a large bar where players sat atop stylish pedestal seats and rested their feet on polished metal foot rails. The skirted seatback that adorned each seat was embroidered with the letter “F” in gothic script, a touch whose elegance was echoed in the conical Art Deco light fixtures, sheer drapes, glass-topped tables, and decorative plants that gave Fortune a notably composed decorum. Patrons could relax in comfortable seating areas on plush couches that recalled formal living rooms when not playing, and when they were, they could rely on a staff to fetch them drinks so that they would not have to drop out of games. Matinee hours catered to non-working suburban women, as did free admission and free parking in a nearby garage.<sup>319</sup>

Fortune’s eponymous featured game was also far less tactical and combative than the usual casino genres. A close cousin of bingo, Fortune had players purchase cards printed with matrices of numbers, and play involved a sequential calling out of numbers until a player had ticked off a complete row, column, or diagonal. Unlike bingo, however, was the process of number selection; rather than via a random ball drawing, numbers were “selected” by the players themselves, who would take turns

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<sup>316</sup> “Gullible Gambling Patrons,” *Citizens’ League Bulletin* 6, no. 708 (April 4, 1936): 122.

<sup>317</sup> “Seven Eleven,” *Future* 1, no. 11 (March 22, 1935): 3.

<sup>318</sup> “Kansas City—The New Newport,” *Future* 1, no. 6 (February 15, 1935): 3; “If You Don’t Believe Us, Go Take a Look,” *Future* 1, no. 24 (June 21, 1935): 8.

<sup>319</sup> “A Cleanup Wave Hits Kansas City,” *Life* (February 6, 1939), 46-47; Hartmann, *The Kansas City Investigation*, 106, 108; “Kansas City—The New Newport,” *Future* 1, no. 6 (February 15, 1935): 3; Photographs in the Joseph H. “Jack” Wally, Jr. Collection, K0329, SHSMO-KC.

tossing rubber balls into a large box incised with seventy-five holes—each representing a number. Attendants called out each number hit. According to the robin’s-egg blue announcements distributed by *Fortune*, this game had “captivated all the popular gathering places for society,” and was a fixture of upmarket gambling hotspots as well as cruise boats and ocean liners. It was also a boon for the owners. While the wagers—a dime per card—paled in comparison to other gambling dens, a player average of at least two cards per game and a typical rhythm of twenty-five games per hour translated into big profits. While typical player rewards were around \$3 per game (and could approach \$50 in some cases), the house profits for the quiet and refined new “salon of chance” approached \$480,000 in 1938.<sup>320</sup>

If, as *Future* suggested, “there can be no just complaint of the quiet, business-like way these salons are operated,” many of the area’s residents begged to differ. These new gambling spots were far more visible for the city’s suburban public. The Rialto, for instance, was situated on Thirty-Ninth Street halfway between Main Street and Westport High School. “If the students...stop on spring days,” envisioned *Future*, “they may hear the croupiers’ drone and the latest results from the race tracks of the country.”<sup>321</sup> Parents were, of course, more concerned than their children, and neighborhood residents and local churches expressed opposition to the growing reputation of the area for its vice. And if it was not for their immoral activity, perhaps it was for the invisible owners whose looming presence was doubtless assumed; as the city’s landscape of vice crept southward towards the city’s prized suburbs, many were not so sure that the machine would continue to keep its hands out of the garden.

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Several proprietors—including the boss himself—also saw to it that vice leapfrogged over suburban development and sought refuge outside city limits. Locating outside the municipal boundaries had its clear benefits. Not only were owners under less scrutiny from reform-minded citizens, they also could advertise their location as a draw for wealthier patrons who were both vigilant about being seen in the seedier districts of downtown as well as interested in the exclusive air of removal from the city proper.

The main venue on the east edge of the city was the Paradise Inn, located about a mile and a half outside the municipal boundary near the Leeds industrial district. A plain, cinder-block building trimmed with spare neon lighting, the Paradise Inn offered a spacious dance floor, sirloin steak and chicken dinners, and a full “set up” for drinks, which guests were welcome to after paying a quarter-a-head surcharge. Venues like the Paradise that were “in the county outside” of the city limits were prohibited from selling liquor by the drink.<sup>322</sup> Yet they were happy to have their patrons bring plenty of their own booze. With no less than thirty tables, the Paradise was a roomy answer to many of the cramped downtown nightclubs.<sup>323</sup>

The exclusive and aloof South Side had its night clubs too. Mary’s Place, located at Eightieth and Wornall Streets just south of the Country Club District, advertised itself as “where better Kansas City dances.”<sup>324</sup> And the Pusateri family—proprietors of the downtown restaurant (“Society’s Meeting Place”) and New Yorker bar—opened a swanky and expansive South Side nightclub and casino in

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid.

<sup>321</sup> “Seven Eleven,” *Future* 1, no. 11 (March 22, 1935): 3.

<sup>322</sup> “Poor Liquor Control,” *Citizens’ League Bulletin* (October 19, 1935): 27.

<sup>323</sup> See Scrapbook 2, Edna Mae Whithouse Collection, passim, Kansas Collection, RH MS Q261, KSRL, KU.

<sup>324</sup> From matchbook cover, in Scrapbook 2, Edna Mae Whithouse Collection, Kansas Collection, RH MS Q261, KSRL, KU.

1935 at Seventy-Ninth Street and Holmes Road, blocks outside the city limit line.<sup>325</sup> Both of these establishments, situated at the southern extremes of the city's primary landscape of suburban privilege, were doubtless capitalizing on the demand among the city's "smart set" for the earthly pleasures of downtown, albeit in more rarefied and socially and physically convenient settings.

The most high profile spots outside the city limits were north of the Missouri River, where both Johnny Lazia and Pendergast maintained well-patronized facilities. The first venue in the area was the Green Hills Club, opened in 1927 by Twelfth Street swindler Jake Feinberg as a "sylvan retreat" for the city's A-list gamblers. Closed after only a short run due to protests from local Presbyterians, Green Hills was swiftly overshadowed by Cuban Gardens, a far more elaborate casino and nightclub on private grounds near Riverside, a small, unincorporated community some five miles north of downtown.

Owned by Johnny Lazia, Cuban Gardens was a ballroom and upscale gambling den that masqueraded as "a smart supper club for Kansas City's smart set," and consequently boasted an intimidating blend of elegance and surveillance. Its automobile entrance was marked by a small building housing armed guards, who would scrutinize customers and admit only the recognizable ones. Once inside the spacious ballroom and dining room, which regularly boasted a ten-piece orchestra, men as well armed as they were dressed would direct "knowing" patrons to a concealed anteroom where they could play roulette, dice, and blackjack, all under the gaze of armed attendants.

The clandestine casino effectively thwarted efforts by Clay County law enforcement to bust the venue; five raids over the years produced little more than an insight into an extravagant "sight of fashionably gowned women and men in evening clothes, dancing to the strains of "The Chant of the Jungle" and other current hits played by a large band garbed in Spanish costumes."<sup>326</sup> Yet if the sinister side of the club remained invisible to law enforcement, musicians got a clearer picture. When Clouds of Joy singer Billy Massey smarted off to the management, the ensemble's dismissal was swift. "The hood ... told all the band to pack and leave—but fast," recalls Mary Lou Williams. "The rest of the guys were too nice, he said, for him to think about killing Billy."<sup>327</sup> Patrons did not shy away, however, and a steady stream of high rollers ensured that the nightly house profits approached \$8,000, making Cuban Gardens—with an annual revenue of \$2 million—one of Lazia's more lucrative ventures.<sup>328</sup>

The "showpiece of the gambling boom," however, was the proximal Riverside Park Jockey Club, opened in 1928 on the grounds of a former dog track. While a 1905 state statute had banned horse racing in Missouri, Pendergast pressured the state Supreme Court in 1927 to reinterpret the law; under a new loophole, individuals could make payments for the "improvement of a horse's breed," and thus treat bets as "contributions." In this warped logic, winnings were rebranded as "refunds" paid back to contributors whose money "helped" the thoroughbred to run faster than others around an oval track.

In peak season, some seventeen thousand patrons flooded the facility daily to see the results of their "contributions" in eight daily races. While the well-to-do and middle classes could drive in their new automobiles, others could ride directly to the racetrack on the interurban rail line, where a makeshift canopy was added as a second Riverside station to accommodate the racetrack crowds. While these crowds would fill the massive grandstand and crowd around the track, Pendergast, machine cronies, and elite patrons watched the races from the second floor of the clubhouse on the track's west side. Riverside has been known to be a slow course, but Bill Kyne—the Pendergast-hired

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<sup>325</sup> "New Pussys," *Future* 1, no. 20 (May 24, 1935): 3.

<sup>326</sup> Reddig, *Tom's Town*, 166.

<sup>327</sup> Cited in Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 87.

<sup>328</sup> Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 109.

manager—saw that its mile-long track surface of packed loess soil provided good footing for horses, and that its efficient tabulators were reputed for their speed in posting results. These features translated into renown by the early 1930s, when Riverside attracted leading owners, trainers, and jockeys from across the United States. And while Pendergast's name was never officially associated with the track, it was an open secret that the track was his venture run by his associates. Kansas Citians quickly dubbed the venue “Pendergast's Track,” and a local paper affirmed that it was “one of the choice pickings of the management.”<sup>329</sup>

Riverside also laid bare an important reality: that a wide-open doctrine under the machine did not equate to a free market. Bill Kyne pledged to manage Riverside only if competing downtown rackets folded so as to “afford a clear track for the racket to the river.”<sup>330</sup> Pendergast agreed, as he wanted Riverside to be a self-sufficient business that operated entirely on its gambling profits. As a local paper made plain, “if bookmaking for Riverside races is permitted in Kansas City, it reduces the profits of the proprietors of Riverside who are said to be the higher ups in the dominant KC political machine.”<sup>331</sup> When the track first opened, the boss sent out orders that “the bookies and even the dice and card rackets were to fold up so that all the chumps would have to go to Riverside to lose their money.” Yet the pushback from “youngsters” in charge of the small-scale gambling dens suggested another truism of Kansas City's vice economy: that Pendergast, while controlling, was not omnipotent. In June 1936, an “authority” revised the machine's previous restrictions, instructing the city's “fly-by-night” and “small fry” bookmakers to refrain simply from placing bets at Riverside Park or on other races that coincided with Riverside's. “The boys have been tipped off to go easy on the games only in the afternoons during the race.”<sup>332</sup>

This sort of pressure was merely a specific form of the typical demands of the machine. While the “better bars” observed the midnight closing laws, those that stayed open all night had to be “right with the administration.” After all, the “drive against violators” in Kansas City was geared not towards law breakers, but towards the “borderline businesses” that refused to submit to the machine by paying tribute, hosting slot machines, or hiring employees supported by the Pendergast “union.”<sup>333</sup> These businesses could expect retaliation in multiple forms. The police might station decoy deputies to run off potential customers. If businesses failed still to comply—as the owner of the Harlem Nite Club discovered in 1935—a bomb would quickly jolt them into cooperation.<sup>334</sup>

This sort of tug-of-war was typical across the city's vice landscape during the '30s. Pendergast's wide-open doctrine meant that countless mobsters and racketeers were at work setting up clubs and gambling dens. And as in many environments of abundance, there was fierce competition. As a historian writes, “the gambling operators found that they faced as much interference from crooks trying to horn in as they did from reformers who demanded their business be suppressed.”<sup>335</sup> That was true. Yet many operators were also seeking to duck the powers that allowed them to be functioning in the first place. There might have been no formal legal restrictions at play in Kansas City, but the machine made clear that there was still a firm set of rules in place. And just as they would have done under a legitimate police force, club owners ducked Pendergast's “regulations” in ways that made for a dynamic landscape. Venues often closed their doors as swiftly as they opened them. Some

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<sup>329</sup> “Patriots, Go to Riverside,” *Future* 1, no. 20 (May 24, 1935): 2.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>331</sup> “Gambling Houses Closed?” *Citizens' League Bulletin* 6, no. 761 (June 12, 1937): 348.

<sup>332</sup> “Gamblers Cooperate,” *Citizens' League Bulletin* 6, no. 717 (June 6, 1936): 158; “Patriots, Go to Riverside,” *Future* 1, no. 20 (May 24, 1935): 2; “Gambling Houses Closed?” *Citizens' League Bulletin* 6, no. 761 (June 12, 1937): 348.

<sup>333</sup> “What Will It Be?” *Future* 1, no. 5 (February 8, 1935): 3.

<sup>334</sup> *Kansas City Star* (January 3, 1935), 1.

<sup>335</sup> Reddig, *Tom's Town*, 166.

were open only for months. Others closed and moved with only slight rebrandings. These were the marks of not only a competitive market, changing tastes, and the occasional poor investment. They were also proof of the looming presence of a clear dictator whose power over his wide open-town was formidable, but never absolute.<sup>336</sup>

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In a city where nightlife was king, there was bound to be an infectious centripetal energy that led many middle- and upper-middle class residents to yearn for venues where they would experience the fanciful entertainments of the era, albeit in less illicit settings. Developers doubtless sensed this demand, and met it by building large ballrooms where Kansas Citians could go to dance to the city's finest jazz orchestras in more rarefied surroundings than the cramped and illicit nightclubs.

The most impressive was the Pla-Mor, a mammoth entertainment complex and ballroom at 3142 Main Street that was modeled after New York's Roseland, Detroit's Graystone, and Chicago's Aragon—all major dance palaces of the era. Opening on Thanksgiving evening in 1927 to a crowd of 4,100, the Pla-Mor boasted a ground-floor bowling alley and billiards area, a separate ice rink for both sport and entertainment, and, as its centerpiece, an immense, 14,000-square-foot dance floor with room for more than 3,000 dancers.

"A Cinderella's Palace to Glorify the Dance," the Pla-Mor boasted a formal and sumptuous interior. "Wall decorations of freehand painting," plush carpeting, velour tapestries, Italian furniture, and jungle motifs shaped an environment that was both elegant and exotic. The cavernous ballroom and dance floor were apparently more "strictly patterned," yet were remarkable for their elegant drapes and chromatic lighting, which cast shifting hues onto the "wondrous arched ceiling," a surface adorned with lattice patterning and bowl-shaped lights made of beaded glass chains. The loftiness of the room was echoed by the buoyancy of the floor, which was spring-loaded with some 4,000 individual coils to give patrons an extra sense of lift as they danced the fox-trot, Charleston, and Black Bottom to the sounds of the city's established and rotating jazz orchestras.<sup>337</sup> The Pla-Mor also featured an ice rink for the faddish spectacle of figure skating. In February 1937, emcee Eli Madof introduced famous Norwegian figure skater Sonja Henie at the Pla-Mor for a three-part show that showcased the elegant and showy moves that had won Henie the title "Pavlova of the Ice."<sup>338</sup> "The Dance of the Dying Swan" was the highlight.

While the Pla-Mor was the largest of the city's new dance halls, many musicians and dancers preferred the more intimate El Torreon just down Linwood Boulevard. Having opened only a month after the Pla-Mor, the El Torreon nonetheless attracted 3,000 patrons on its opening night. Decorated in a Spanish Mission style, the ballroom could accommodate some 2,000 dancers as well as plenty of spectators, who would stand along the balconies that overlooked the dance floor on three of its four sides. Perceived as a warmer space than the Pla-Mor, both visually and acoustically, the El Torreon countered the formality of the Pla-Mor with exotic whimsy. Above the dance floor, a massive crystal ball threw tongues of light across the room, and higher still, the ballroom's "dominant theme,"—an "azure, star studded ceiling"—justified the new venue's motto: "where the clouds roll by."<sup>339</sup> Through

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<sup>336</sup> "They Really Closed Them," *Future* 1, no. 26 (July 5, 1935): 3. "Patriots, Go to Riverside," *Future* 1, no. 20 (May 24, 1935): 2.

<sup>337</sup> *Kansas City Star* (November 20, 1927); *Kansas City Times* (November 25, 1927). See also Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 59-60.

<sup>338</sup> Event Program, Folder 3, Edna Mae Whithouse Collection, Kansas Collection, RH MS P797.3, KSRL, KU.

<sup>339</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 60.

the 1930s, El Torreon offered dancing every night of the week save for Monday, as well as classes on Tuesday and Thursdays. The space could also be rented for private parties.<sup>340</sup>

Nearby apartment hotels also featured prime entertainments, albeit of a more respectable and reserved flavor. The Zephyr Room and El Casbah Supper Club at the Bellerive Apartment Hotel on Armour Boulevard and the Crown Room at the Hotel LaSalle on Linwood Boulevard were popular spots. These bars were exempt from the city's twenty-percent drink tax. They were also far more genteel than the city's typical spots. The Zephyr Room gave out gardenias to ladies every Tuesday night during the summer, and the reform-oriented Citizens League held their annual dinners there. These were, after all, the sorts of places a visitor would glimpse when thumbing through a copy of the "See Kansas City" brochure upon arriving in town.<sup>341</sup> City boosters, it seemed, were eager to present their city as a hub of classy entertainments even though it was likely visitors were aware of the city's true colors.

And in a city known for its warm (and often sweltering) summer nights, entertainments were not confined to interiors. As buildings rose in height due to healthy capital flows and improved elevator technologies, rooftop terraces became popular among the upper-middle classes. When the exclusive Kansas City Club introduced its new entertainment space some thirteen stories above the intersection of Thirteenth Street and Baltimore Avenue in the summer of 1926, some one hundred of the five hundred and fifty attendants were turned away. Performing in a "bower of summer garden beauty, beside a fountain resplendent in rainbow colored 'moonlight,'" the 11-piece Corsden-Mac Orchestra serenaded the patrons.<sup>342</sup> Many other establishments followed suit. The next May, the "Congress Roof" atop the city's Hotel President opened for "supper dancing" on Saturday nights. On the venue's opening night, some three hundred patrons danced to the tunes of the hotel's twelve-piece orchestra from ten to one in the morning, proving the true extent of Kansas City's reputation as the wide-open town: a good time was available, as it turned out, in every corner—and every elevation—in the city.<sup>343</sup>

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<sup>340</sup> See *Future* 1, no. 8 (March 1, 1935): 3.

<sup>341</sup> "See Kansas City" Brochure, u.d., Folder 3, Edna Mae Whithouse Collection, Kansas Collection, RH MS P797, KSRL, KU.

<sup>342</sup> *Kansas City Star* (June 6, 1926), from the "Roof Gardens," Mounted Clippings File (1900-1949), MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>343</sup> *Kansas City Star* (May 6, 1927; May 8, 1927), from "Roof Gardens," Mounted Clippings File (1900-1949), MVSC, KCPL.



## II. THE PERIPHERY

*“He lost track of distance on the bus. At first he oriented himself according to the river and by numbered streets, but then the river disappeared, and the numbers became random, senseless, the city swarming about him, unordered and immense. Then something changed. The bus groaned up a curving hill, and as if a painted backdrop had fallen into place, they appeared suddenly to enter a different city altogether: a long, flat thoroughfare whose median had been planted with peonies and whose houses on either side appeared in the unreal dimensions of a movie set, some made of brick with three-story columns in the front, others of finely cut stone, their doors and windows decorated by fluted ironwork.”*

-Whitney Terrell, *The Huntsman*

French author André Maurois did not hold back his praise of America’s heartland metropolis. “Few people in the world, or in America for that matter,” he wrote in his journal, “realize that Kansas City is one of the prettiest cities on earth.” Its urban core might have boasted “violent contrasts of skyscrapers and wasteland,” but three miles south of downtown, an area called the Country Club District was “a masterpiece of city planning.” “The streets,” Maurois went on to describe, “follow the curves of the hills or the winding of streams. Flowering shrubs encircle the houses. The homes themselves, designed in the best of taste, are artfully grouped in an immense park whose trees are unequalled in variety and luxuriance. At street crossings an antique statue, three shafts of Grecian columns rise from a carpet of low-growing foliage. Few cities have been built with so much regard for beauty.”<sup>344</sup>

Maurois was writing in the mid-1940s, but he was describing a landscape that had taken shape during the previous three decades. In 1910, civic leaders had begun touting Kansas City as “America’s most beautiful city,” a descriptor they justified by funneling visitors towards the city’s celebrated boulevards.<sup>345</sup> By the mid-1920s, however, residents and visitors could find evidence for the tagline in a new focal point, developer Jesse Clyde “J. C.” Nichols’ thousand-acre development that was transforming the ragged prairie of the city’s southwestern corner into a new echelon of suburban development.

Sylvan beauty and aesthetic flourishes had been trademarks of suburban developments since Frederick Law Olmsted ushered in a new echelon of landscape standards in the mid-nineteenth century. Yet the “thousand acres restricted” that Nichols spearheaded in Kansas City in 1908 were distinct from places like Riverside, Illinois, and Llewellyn Park, New Jersey, two prototypes that set new standards for suburban design. Unlike the residential developers who sought to create bastions of aloof privilege removed from the grit of the city, Nichols wanted to create a suburban world that would become an integral albeit protected piece of the metropolitan fabric.

Contemporary scholars of urban growth often invoke the concept of a “design moment,” a “critical juncture in the history of a city” when the “basic components of a city’s character—its social fabric and urban form—are fundamentally altered.”<sup>346</sup> In stark contrast to the incremental changes in

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<sup>344</sup> André Maurois, *From My Journal*, trans. Joan Charles (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1947), 23.

<sup>345</sup> *America’s Most Beautiful City* (Kansas City: Commercial Club, 1910); *Between Trains in Kansas City* (Kansas City: Lechtman Printing Company, 1913), both cited in Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 76; *Scenic Route through the Country Club District: America’s Most Beautiful Residential Section* (Kansas City, MO: J. C. Nichols Company, 1920), MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>346</sup> Jacob A. Wagner and Michael Frisch, “Introduction: New Orleans and the Design Moment, in *New Orleans and the Design Moment*, ed. Jacob A. Wagner and Michael Frisch (London: Routledge, 2013), 2.

urban form that preceded it, the expansion of the Country Club District in Kansas City's southwestern quadrant unveiled a new method of developing, building, and maintaining residential space—one that borrowed much from the look and feel of the City Beautiful, but twisted it into a newly domesticated formulation. Sweeping lawns spilled over into the boulevard medians and parklets. Graceful artworks—small in scale but tasteful in their lines and forms—seemed to have floated out of the ostensibly tasteful homes of privilege only to moor in the sea of green. The publicly visible domain seemed to simply be an extension of the private one. And to make the theme of privacy and separation even more apparent, the entire landscape was designed to be seen not on foot, but from the interior of a moving car.

Holistically planned, socially constricted, and designed in the interest of long-term stability, his Country Club District not only pointed the way to a new ethos and format of suburban planning that would become dominant in America after the end of World War II. It also ensured that Interwar Kansas City was metropolis of two faces: if the bombast of the skyscrapers and factories and the muscle of Pendergast made the urban core a vortex of conspicuous urban power, Kansas City's South Side represented the negative image—a landscape of control, predictability, and stability. It suggested that the frontier cowtown's salvation was to be located not in the urban wilderness, but in the sylvan kingdom of suburbia.

### ***A New City Beautiful***

The hub of Kansas City's suburban life began its southward migration during the 1890s, when elites began moving out of the Quality Hill neighborhood on downtown's west side into fashionable areas along the streetcar lines that ran southward from the urban core.<sup>347</sup> Of the several neighborhoods that came to house the growing ranks of upper-middle and upper-class residents, Hyde Park became the dominant choice. Situated along a former ravine that had been rendered into rustic, pastoral elegance by George Kessler, the neighborhood quickly boasted a crop of grand homes.<sup>348</sup> The southward reach continued in 1904, when the Rockhill development extended the landscape across the pastoral sweep of Gillham Road. Rockhill boasted graceful homes, meandering streets, a streetcar line extension with its own right-of-way, and a series of low-slung, native limestone fences that quickly became the neighborhood's unifying trademark. The package of amenities was apropos given that the area was the brainchild of William Rockhill Nelson, the *Kansas City Star* editor and ardent champion of City Beautiful pursuits.<sup>349</sup>

Both of these new areas doubtless caught the eye of J. C. Nichols, a young developer born in 1880 in nearby Olathe, Kansas, who had commenced his homebuilding career in 1903 by constructing

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<sup>347</sup> Coleman, *The Kansas City Establishment*, 266; Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 56; Shortridge, *Kansas City and How It Grew*, 78-79; Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement in Kansas City*, 43-44.

<sup>348</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 57-58.

<sup>349</sup> Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement in Kansas City*, 18-19. If Rockhill took shape as an elegant suburban neighborhood, beneath the surface it was more akin to a fiefdom. Like many of his wealthy, Progressivist contemporaries, Nelson mindset was paternalistic to the core, and Rockhill was essentially a residential monument to his own sense of social and cultural superiority and his flawed belief (common at the time) of trickle-down enculturation. That viewpoint was clear from the neighborhood's layout, which was a spatialized version of a social hierarchy. Nelson's grand and rambling mansion sat at the center in a large sprawling lawn, with the surrounding homes gradually decreasing in size as one moved further away from the sacred castle. And few, to the surprise of many, were for sale; Nelson rented all of the homes in his district, giving him the power and oversight of a landlord. See Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 63-64.

inexpensive, run-of-the-mill homes for working-class buyers in Kansas City, Kansas.<sup>350</sup> Nichols quickly proved to be of a much different mindset than the typical midwestern developer intent on quick sells and fast money. In the summer of 1900, during his undergraduate years at the University of Kansas, he had whisked off to Europe on a three-month trip that affected his views for the rest of his career. Unlike the plutocrats who basked in the grandeur of posh hotels and elite museums on their expensive grand tours, Nichols—with his middle-class farming background and Midwestern pragmatism—fixated on the public spaces of everyday Europeans. In the market squares of cities, small towns, and villages, many of which he reached by bicycle, he glimpsed the antimatter of the American city—a landscape of architectural coherence and heritage, bustling yet intimate town centers that had been in use for centuries, and a sense of rootedness among the people.<sup>351</sup>

America's urban visionaries—and Kansas City's foremost among them— had taken great measures to Europeanize their cities beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The celebrated boulevards that traversed Kansas City were a testament to how landscape architects like George Kessler had blended Olmsted-inspired pastoralism to the grandiosity of the civic spaces exemplified by Haussman's Paris. Nichols himself had been impressed by Paris (if unsatisfied by what he judged as an inadequate provision of transit options), and as a planning-minded man, he appreciated the results of the City Beautiful vision—its “civic groups of buildings, the establishment of parkways and boulevards, the creation of trafficways for increasing the efficiency of the transportation of their cities—all splendid works.”<sup>352</sup> Yet he was also aware that his own city's system, despite its renown, was falling drastically short in its goal to “give a permanent residence character to certain sections.”<sup>353</sup>

Without zoning and other land control measures, the City Beautiful movement did little to quell the onset of quick disinvestment, a distinctly American phenomenon that disquieted Nichols above all else. He lamented the fact that in areas that were “ultra-fashionable a dozen or a score of years ago; there you will find mansions turned into boarding houses and modiste shops, or remodeled or razed for office and store buildings; or if some homes have not been used in that way, you will find their original residence values destroyed by the establishment of stores, shops, undertaking parlors, and the like, in proximity.”<sup>354</sup> For Nichols, unchecked market turbulence, transiency, and rampant speculation conspired to create a city whose government lost tax money, whose homeowners lost their investments, and whose populace lost any sense of a coherent and lasting aesthetic landscape. The fact that those phenomena were easily glimpsed only a block or two off of the Kansas City's most exclusive boulevard stretches made him all the more desperate for a new approach to planning and development.<sup>355</sup>

Nichols also believed, in contrast to the conventional wisdom of the day, that investing in aesthetically pleasing landscapes could be a lucrative enterprise—that “beauty and business” were not

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<sup>350</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 180.

<sup>351</sup> Rose, “There is Less Smoke in the District,” 47.

<sup>352</sup> *Olathe Mirror*, (August 9, 1900; August 23, 1900); J. C. Nichols, *Real Estate Subdivisions: The Best Manner of Handling Them* (Washington, DC: American Civic Association, 1912), 14. This text is a reprint of a speech Nichols gave at the Fifth Annual Convention of the National Association of Real Estate Exchanges in Louisville, Kentucky on June 20, 1912.

<sup>353</sup> *Report of the Board of Park and Boulevard Commissioners of Kansas City, Mo., Embracing Recommendations for the Establishment of a Park and Boulevard System for Kansas City, Resolution of October 12, 1893* (Kansas City, 1893). As one historian notes, stability was the watchword of one of the system's most ardent proponents, August Meyer. See Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 53. City Beautiful proponents might have invoked the stabilization of land values in their push for new parks and boulevards, but they were really concerned with infrastructural projects, civic spaces, and social hygiene than with the stability of the residential areas that constituted the vast majority of the city's land area.

<sup>354</sup> J. C. Nichols, “When You Buy a Home Site, You Make an Investment: Try to Make It a Safe One.” *Good Housekeeping* (February 1923), 39.

<sup>355</sup> Schirmer, *A City Divided*, 51-55.

mutually exclusive domains.<sup>356</sup> Yet unlike his City Beautiful predecessors, he argued that the primary space of execution should be not portentous civic spaces, but rather the private holdings of the affluent suburban homeowner.<sup>357</sup> Monumental buildings and elegant roads, believed Nichols, were “no more important to the future of American cities than the guarantee to the man who puts \$1,000 in his cottage, or \$100,000 in his mansion, that his surroundings will remain permanently good and attractive for residence purposes.”<sup>358</sup> Nichols put it another way in 1923, the year Kansas City (following New York’s 1917 precedent) passed its first zoning ordinance: “There is a desperate need in every city of ten thousand or more, for effective city planning, and the kind of city planning that means most to the individual property owner is a satisfactory scheme of zoning which districts property according to the uses to which it may be put, and restrict it to those uses.”<sup>359</sup> City planning, in other words, was coterminous with residential development, and a city of beauty and stability was a city that prevented “encroachments” from affecting restricted neighborhoods—areas in which residents themselves would relinquish certain private property rights for the good of the whole.

Nichols’ ultimate goal was as clear as it was unprecedented: to build a new suburban landscape of high-end homes whose beauty and economic stability were near permanent, whose homes retained their residents for a generation or more, and whose size and influence would lead it to become integral to the core city’s image and identity. The primary canvas of execution was the fully restricted, master-planned development, a predominantly residential area that would nevertheless include all measure of conveniences and services:

That neighborhoods will have ample playgrounds ... adequate park areas, quiet, carefully planned, curving minor residential streets designed to discourage through traffic—major highways—boulevards—parkways—and circumferential drives—all worked out to fit into a good municipal and regional pattern. This long life home area, carefully restricted, must have elementary and high schools, libraries, shopping centers, churches with community activities, fire stations, utility and municipal facilities, etc., all carefully located — well spaced — planned for essential expansion as the area grows. Residential areas must provide sites for smaller homes as well as larger ones, carefully allocated in respective areas. Transition from smaller homes to large estates must be carefully planned. Buffers to protect homes areas should be provided if necessary. Golf courses, parks, parkways, institutional lands, well-planned neighborhood shopping centers ... streams ... may all create good transition and seams of protection for residential areas.<sup>360</sup>

If that retrospective description of the Country Club District sounds ambitious and comprehensive, it was. Yet Nichols believed that “the goal of every subdivider and developer should be to sell not only land but to sell and deliver protection.” The mantra of “planning for permanence” meant including and protecting everything that could possibly color the perceptions and loyalties of homeowners, from the look of the lawns to the ethnicity of the neighbors to the presence of social

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<sup>356</sup> Carolyn S. Loeb, *Entrepreneurial Vernacular: Developers’ Subdivisions in the 1920s* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 166; “Millions in New Shops,” *Kansas City Star* (April 30, 1922), 12D; Rose, “There is Less Smoke in the District,” 46.

<sup>357</sup> Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 66-74; Loeb, *Entrepreneurial Vernacular*, 166.

<sup>358</sup> Nichols, *Real Estate Subdivisions*, 14.

<sup>359</sup> Nichols, “When You Buy a Home Site,” 38-39.

<sup>360</sup> J. C. Nichols, “Planning for Permanence,” Speech to the National Association of Real Estate Boards, New York City, November 18, 1948, SHSMO-KC. Nichols’ speeches are all available in the J. C. Nichols Company Records (K0106), SHSMO-KC. Nichols offered a similar vision of residential areas in 1925, See “Town Planning,” in *Real Estate Handbook*, ed. Blake Snyder (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1925), 363-364.

institutions and commercial entities.<sup>361</sup> Multiple lines of defense—restrictive covenants, municipal ordinances, and bottom-up policing by homeowners associations—would be in place to protect these areas and manage an overall impression.<sup>362</sup> And if some City Beautiful proponents had championed the interaction of the working and upper classes in the interests of “social hygiene,” Nichols believed that a healthy metropolis was a segregated one—“one in which people knew their place and gravitated naturally to their own kind and class.”<sup>363</sup> In all, this was not simply home building, but “community building,” a process of forging, by way of residential development, an entire residential, commercial, and social landscape.<sup>364</sup>

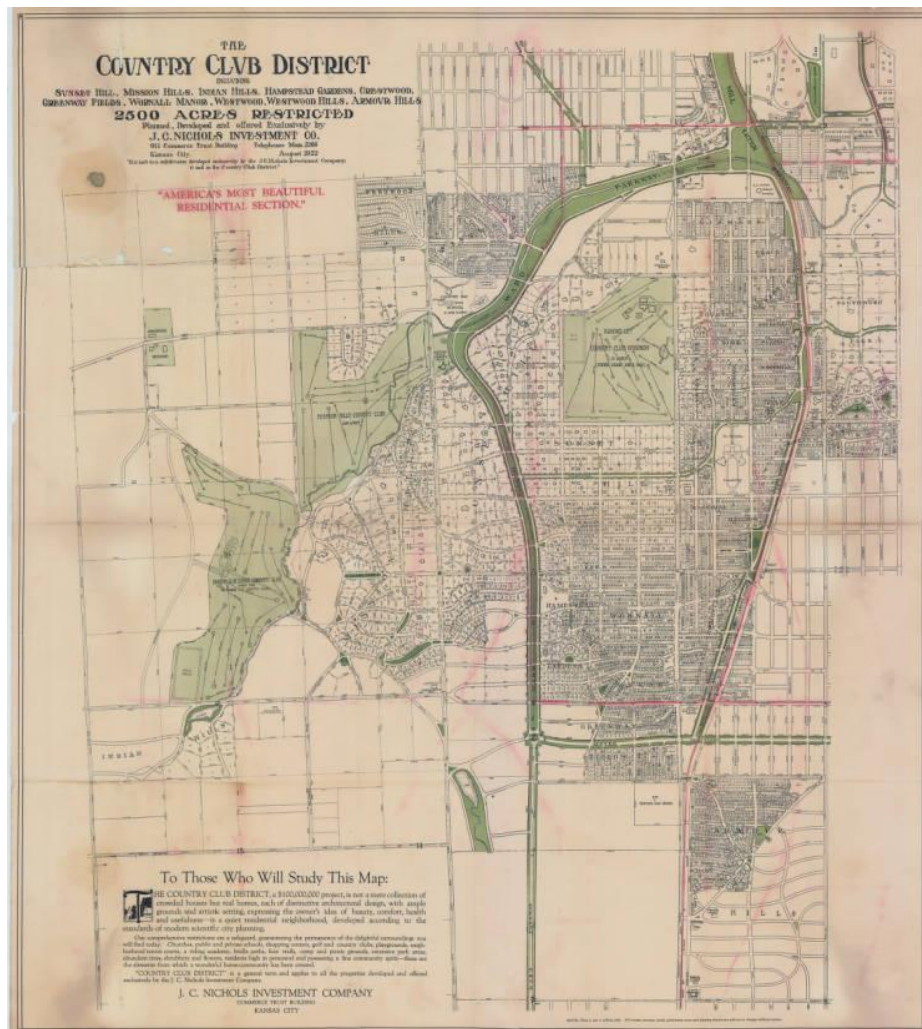


Figure 12: The Country Club District in 1917 when its holdings totaled 2,500 acres. MVSC, KCPL

<sup>361</sup> J. C. Nichols, “A Developer’s View of Deed Restrictions,” *Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics* 5 (May 1929): 134; Nichols, “Planning for Permanence.”

<sup>362</sup> See Becky M. Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese, “Introduction,” in *The Suburb Reader*, ed. Nicolaides and Wiese (New York: Routledge, 2006), 9.

<sup>363</sup> Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 70.

<sup>364</sup> Weiss, *The Rise of the Community Builders*, 1.

Nichols began charting his path in 1905, when he started piecing together the initial land holdings for his “Country Club District” southwest of the Rockhill development across a small waterway called Brush Creek. (Figure 12) Formally announced in 1908 as a one-thousand-acre district of “fully-restricted” property, the Country Club District began as several separate subdivisions—the most exclusive of which was Sunset Hill, so named for its abundance of westward facing prospects strung along a sinuous hillside overlooking Brush Creek. Nichols admired the elegant ruggedness of Kansas City’s parks, and recruited George Kessler to help him develop the initial streetscapes on land he had purchased from a wealthy local family.<sup>365</sup> By 1910, Sunset Hill boasted thirteen grand homes designed by professional architects (rather than developed from stock plans), with the average cost per home clocking in at \$35,000 (\$852,000 today).<sup>366</sup> Nichols hoped that his new development would, at the very least, become the next link in the chain of southward reaching residential areas for the affluent.

Building homes for the affluent required providing certain essential services, and Nichols went further than any developer before him in suturing his landscape into the city’s existing practical and aesthetic infrastructure. His first pursuit was rail service. Nichols courted other investors to form an improvement association with the financial power to purchase a lackluster dummy line in the area, only to turn around and donate it to the Metropolitan Street Railway Company for conversion to electric service.<sup>367</sup> He even convinced the company to name the lines for his nascent developments, which meant that prospective buyers or other residents boarding streetcar lines at hubs in the urban core would glimpse the elegant sounding “Country Club” and “Sunset Hill” on southward bound cars.<sup>368</sup> This move both legitimated his new developments and emphasized that they were integrated into the city’s rail network—key for attracting an affluent clientele.

The more important link to Kansas City’s urban core, however, was via boulevards. Nichols made sure that “at whatever cost,” his development would be “put on the map,” a statement meant to emphasize the Country Club District’s suturing to the city’s famous parkways. Emphasizing that this element was fitting both “physically and psychologically,” Nichols knew that the boulevards carried a sense of prestige in Kansas City, both for residents and outsiders.<sup>369</sup> After the success and mounting reputation of the system, no area—new or old—could call itself legitimate without them, and their presence in the Country Club District would be a powerful symbolic connection to the city. Boulevards were also doubly imperative for a self-described automobile suburb; Nichols knew that the affluent were quickly embracing the nascent technology, and that the city’s broad thoroughfares would become the primary conduits of movement.<sup>370</sup> (In the late 1920s, Shaemas O’Sheel would notice the striking propensity of Kansas City’s residents to be on the move in their

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<sup>365</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 69-70, 115.

<sup>366</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 193-196.

<sup>367</sup> The practices of donating property was part necessity. At the outset, the Country Club District was outside city limits, and municipal entities needed near irresistible perks to extend essential services that affluent homeowners would expect. By 1911, the Country Club District would sit firmly within city limits after a major annexation extended the southern city limit to near Seventh-Fifth Street, some three miles south of Sunset Hill.

<sup>368</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 78-80.

<sup>369</sup> Nichols, *Real Estate Subdivisions*, 9. “At whatever cost, make at least one of your important streets an integral part of your city’s boulevards or important thoroughfares. ... It was the right time both physically and psychologically, in creating that section of the city, to put our property squarely in the path of our Park and Boulevard System.”

<sup>370</sup> The popularity of automobiles among the homeowners of the wealthy northwest portion of the Country Club District prompted the Metropolitan Street Railway to demote the Sunset Hill line to a restricted “stub service” by 1920. See Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 104.

cars—something he attributed to the lack of confinement inherent in the prairie sensibility and lifestyle.<sup>371</sup>)

Several boulevards would eventually trace the district—Brookside Boulevard on the east, Meyer Boulevard on the south, and Mill Creek Parkway leading towards the city proper—but it was Ward Parkway that was to become the district's (and eventually the city's) dominant thoroughfare. (Figure 13) Running on either side of Brush Creek towards the Kansas state line before turning up the hill and running southward for a three-mile stretch to Meyer Boulevard, the Country Club District's central thoroughfare would become the ultimate answer to the more established Paseo and Gillham Road.<sup>372</sup> Two roadways of three lanes each framed a median ninety feet wide on the main stretch and up to three-hundred feet wide in the portion running along Brush Creek.<sup>373</sup> And unlike the city's other boulevards, Ward Parkway would be devoid of multi-unit housing. Grandiose private ownership would be the exclusive theme of Kansas City's newest street.



Figure 13: Ward Parkway looking north from Fifty-Ninth Street in 1920. P1, No. 9  
*MVSC, KCPL*

That showcase of private grandeur was evident by 1915, by which the first handful of estates were completed at the Fifty-Fifth Street intersection.<sup>374</sup> The home of local transit executive Bernard Corrigan was situated on a massive lot at the intersection's northwest corner, and blended Prairie School horizontality with Arts and Crafts ornamentation. Next door, the estate of Charles Keith (and later the Nichols family) was a cozy take on grand domesticity. Both of these were countered across the street, where Mack B. Nelson's 30,000-square-foot Beaux Arts mansion established an over-the-top sense of grandeur with its immense bulk and stately Corinthian columns. A fourth home—a huge

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<sup>371</sup> O'Sheel, "Kansas City," 377.

<sup>372</sup> In 1920, the roadway would be extended to Seventy-Fifth Street.

<sup>373</sup> Nichols virtually ensured the boulevard's creation via the same approach he had taken with the streetcar lines: by donating land to the responsible entity. When he gave the city's powerful parks and boulevards commission a half-million dollars' worth of land, he made sure that it ran directly through the development as a sort of infrastructural spine—a path that George Kessler had devised in the interest of maximum aesthetic and functional value.

<sup>374</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 198-199.

Georgian edifice on three acres just west of the Nelson property—rounded out the block.<sup>375</sup> These homes might have differed in architectural character, but they all fulfilled a single theme: stately and tasteful eclecticism. Their grandeur set the stage for the subsequent spate of construction that would add some fifteen more homes to the street by the end of World War I, swiftly turning a former stretch of ragged prairie into the city's most prized residential thoroughfare.

In these early years, Nichols continually looked to a number of suburban developments around the country for ideas, and he found the most direct inspiration in a 1912 visit to Roland Park, a celebrated development outside of Baltimore begun in the 1890s.<sup>376</sup> What made Roland Park (and its nearby Guilford extension) stand out was not their prettiness, but rather the protection of that prettiness—a network of deed restrictions that was unprecedented in scale and scope. Restrictions on suburban properties had been either minimal or slow to take hold during the late nineteenth century (despite their championing by the likes of Olmsted and others), but the turn of the century had brought a new enthusiasm for stricter property controls. In Roland Park, for instance, restrictions called for setbacks not only at the front but also at the rear and sides of houses. They banned all nuisances on lots, as well as businesses and multi-unit buildings. Farm animals were certainly prohibited, but so too were any activities that resulted in the emission of smoke (common in an era of coal furnaces). They even strengthened the process of design review, giving the Roland Park Company the right to reject proposals for aesthetic reasons. And in a move the prophesied what would become a *de rigueur* element of Jazz Age restrictions, they forbade residency by blacks.<sup>377</sup>

Nichols was even more enthusiastic about these measures than Roland Park's keen residents, and essentially copied them for his subsequent developments. His enthusiasm was particularly evident in the plans for Mission Hills, Kansas, the most ambitious expansion yet of the Country Club District. Established in 1914, Mission Hills was meant to become the most elegant neighborhood in all of Kansas City. Positioned adjacent to Sunset Hill just across the Kansas state line, the new subdivision was envisioned as a country club estate. Its landscape would boast baronial estates situated along a web of undulating streets threaded around sweeping fairways of three private country clubs that formed a barrier between the elegant development and its undeveloped rural surroundings.<sup>378</sup>

Aside from its conspicuous exclusivity and stringent restrictions, Mission Hills boasted a new element that would become a quintessential mark of Nichols' properties: a mandatory homeowners association that could undertake all the services a municipal government would otherwise provide. While the original Country Club District Improvement Association, begun in 1909, was a voluntary association of lot owners, membership in the Mission Hills Home Company was compulsory and automatic upon the purchase of property. The services it provided were unprecedented: officers arranged for the removal of trash, the enforcement of deed restrictions, and the all-important process of snow removal during Kansas City's often bitterly cold winters. In one respect, these were necessary,

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<sup>375</sup> Shortridge, *Kansas City and How It Grew*, 81; William S. Worley, "Ward Parkway, Kansas City, Missouri," in *The Grand American Avenue, 1850-1920*, ed. Jan Cigliano and Sarah Bradford Landau (San Francisco: Pomegranate Artbooks, 1994), 288-291.

<sup>376</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 28-36, 141. Begun by former Kansas Citian Edward Bouton under the urging of Kessler, Roland Park was lauded as the finest residential section in the country by such luminaries as San Francisco developer Duncan McDuffie and Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. As Nichols reflected to Bouton after his 1912 visit, "When people ask me how I enjoyed my trip and what I saw," he wrote, "I tell them I saw Roland Park; and I feel there is not much need of describing anything I saw elsewhere." See J. C. Nichols to Edward H. Bouton, December 12, 1912, Box 83, Roland Park Company Records, quoted in Robert Fogelson, *Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870-1930* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 63.

<sup>377</sup> Fogelson, *Bourgeois Nightmares*, 65.

<sup>378</sup> James M. Mayo, *The American Country Club: Its Origins and Development* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 121; Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 111-112.



as Mission Hills' position in Kansas (and four-mile distance from the nearest Kansas town) meant that annexation was a distant prospect. Yet Nichols also wanted to begin giving his subdivisions powers he did not want to entrust to a democratically elected city government. From Nichols' perspective, if the city was a necessity in terms of providing key utilities and services, it was a hindrance in terms of the small-scale enforcement of restrictions.<sup>379</sup>

With Mission Hills, Nichols also moved to galvanize resistance to change more effectively than ever before. In the first few years of developing properties, Nichols had found that his practice of requiring a majority vote of homeowners to renew restrictions left too much to chance. It placed the burden on those who were advocates of the restrictions, and also risked the restrictions lapsing inadvertently if homeowners did not organize to renew them. Nichols' solution was to create what amounted to self-perpetuating restrictions. In Mission Hills, the original, twenty-five year restrictions would renew automatically unless a majority of homeowners made the move to modify or eliminate them. Under this new scheme, restrictions would be all but impossible to kill, and they would also not be subject to inadvertent expiration.<sup>380</sup>

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If the Country Club District had begun to unseat Hyde Park and Rockhill from their positions atop Kansas City's housing hierarchy by the onset of World War I, the 1920s ushered in a level of dominance for the district unmatched by any other in America. During the initial decade of development, Nichols had been nervous and apprehensive about his barriers to success, including the quickly rising costs of homebuilding, anxieties among the upper-middle-classes about rising living costs and inflation, and an uncertainty about how to control the look of his developments when they were no longer under his direct control.<sup>381</sup> Yet with the arrival of the 1920s, he turned a new leaf in his ambitious pursuit of an ideal suburban community whose economy of scale was unprecedented.

Nichols knew that successful expansion required a deeper pool of talent, and in November 1919, he and his company chairman successfully recruited a formerly Philadelphia-based architect and veteran named Edward Buehler Delk. Nichols knew that developing appealing residential and commercial properties for the upper-middle classes would require sophisticated architectural chops, and while there were good architects working in Kansas City and Chicago, Delk had the ideal pedigree: an Ivy-league degree (from the University of Pennsylvania), supplemental training at the University of London, and a membership in the Beaux Arts Society of New York City. These credentials suggested that Delk's work was reliably conservative yet versatile—ideal for a landscape where the guiding program was not architectural purity, but rather an eclecticism unified by a sense of proportionality, good taste, and refinement. It also meant that he would be immune to the local charges of Kansas City's architectural commonplaceness and gaudiness. In return for his talents, the Nichols Company supplied Delk with a new office built by the company, along with sufficient work in Kansas City to establish a lucrative and successful firm.<sup>382</sup>

Delk's tasteful home designs began appearing almost immediately in a host of new, elegantly named subdivisions that swelled the extent of the Country Club District in almost every direction

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<sup>379</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 166-168.

<sup>380</sup> Fogelson, *Bourgeois Nightmares*, 108-109.

<sup>381</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 157.

<sup>382</sup> J. C. Nichols Company Scrapbooks (hereafter JCN), (KC0054), SHSMO, KC, Vol. 4, 215-220. Delk would not actually work as an in-house architect for the J. C. Nichols Company, but as an independent practitioner understood to dedicate his time almost solely to the Company's main projects.

beginning in 1920.<sup>383</sup> That year, Crestwood was platted at the northeastern edge of the development across Brookside Boulevard, and new homesites were added to Wornall Manor and Greenway Fields near Meyer Boulevard, to Brentwood Circle (in Sunset Hill), and to the southern end of Mission Hills. Stratford Gardens and Suncrest were both established in 1922 at the southern reach of Ward Parkway near Meyer Boulevard.<sup>384</sup> Across the state line, Nichols established Westwood Hills north of Mission Hills in 1923.<sup>385</sup> Countless other subdivision names popped up with astonishing regularity: Armour Hills, Armour Fields, Rockhill Park, Rockhill Place, Rockhill Heights, Country Side, South Country Side, Country Side Extension, Wornall Manor, Wornall Homestead, Country Club Ridge, and Country Club Heights. In 1921, when the Nichols Company printed a scenic route map for motorists that would lead them on a circuitous route through the District's old and new areas, it was clear how much expansion was going on in "America's most beautiful residential section."<sup>386</sup> (Figure 14)



Figure 14: Homes of the Wornall Manor subdivision in 1920.  
*J.C. Nichols Scrapbooks, Vol.5, 38. SHSMO-KC*

The multitude of subdivisions might have suggested a patchwork appearance, but Nichols, Delk, and their collaborating landscape architects maintained a standard across the district that yielded coherence. In general, as one moved away from the environs of Sunset Hill and Mission Hills, homes, lawns, and other landscape elements were scaled down in a graduated manner. The proportionality and consistent standard of setbacks, spacing, and positioning lent the different areas a degree of uniformity, despite the fact that homes were of vastly different square footages. That a 2,000-square-foot Dutch Colonial was only blocks away from a 6,000-square-foot Tudor mansion was smoothed over by a consistent standard of aesthetic and spatial controls.

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<sup>383</sup> JCN, Vol. 6, 21, 101-102, 115.

<sup>384</sup> JCN, Vol. 6, 143, 145.

<sup>385</sup> JCN, Vol. 6, 171-172, Vol. 7, 80.

<sup>386</sup> JCN, Vol. 6, 22. See also MVSC digital collection. Nichols even took to buying middling developments around the edges of his growing district and integrating them into his network of restrictions and standards. In 1921, he bought Westwood Park, a small, partly developed area that was begun in 1913 across Brush Creek and Ward Parkway from Sunset Hill. With his purchase of Westwood Park's empty lots, Nichols doubled the minimum cost of construction and beefed up the restrictions to match those in his other subdivisions. Within the first month under his control, Nichols sold as many Westwood Park lots as its original developer had sold in the previous eight years. See Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 132.

An expanded territory also necessitated stricter enforcements, and one of the most far-reaching developments of the '20s was the extension of the Mission Hills model of the mandatory homeowners' association across the entire development. In 1921, the Nichols Company formed the Country Club District Homes Association (whose geographic reach, confusingly, was limited to the area immediately south of the Kansas City Country Club), with the new stipulation that residents and purchasers of the subdivision were required to become paying members. With their funds, the Association's Board of Directors provided many services at a higher quality than the city could, including snow removal, sidewalk cleaning, caring for street trees, providing additional lighting, arranging for garbage collection, and maintaining playgrounds and public areas.<sup>387</sup> During the course of the 1920s, the Nichols Company set up fourteen additional mandatory homes associations, followed by another four in the '30s.<sup>388</sup>

As the middle and upper-middle classes grew considerably during the flush times of the 1920s, Nichols also looked to expand the Country Club District's residency to include more middle-class buyers. In 1922, the Nichols Company announced the Armour Hills subdivision and began to advertise its "homes of moderate cost."<sup>389</sup> Traced by Meyer and Gregory Boulevards on the north and south and Wornall and Oak Streets on the west and east, Armour Hills was the largest subdivision yet attempted by Nichols, and although its houses were constructed on decidedly smaller lots (between fifty and seventy-five feet in width) the neighborhood quickly attracted families headed by business managers, real estate and insurance salesmen, and mid-level professionals who wanted a taste of the exclusive and restricted life.<sup>390</sup> Within four years, 171 households had settled in the neighborhood's northern end, which abutted the Tudor-revival Brookside shopping district.<sup>391</sup>

With Armour Hills, Nichols and his colleagues also drew up a definitive litany of restrictions that would become the Company's gold standard. From the placement of structures on the lots, the direction of the frontage, minimum building widths, setback space from the street, maximum length for structural projections, free yard space, outbuilding placement—everything was hyper-specified. The restrictions also dictated minimum amounts for housing construction, and explicitly prohibited both ownership and tenancy by blacks. Finally, enforcement rights were given not only to the J. C. Nichols Company and the present or future landowners, but also to homeowners in adjacent Nichols subdivisions.<sup>392</sup> In other words, the surrounding areas could police home maintenance standards if they saw fit.

The stringency of these restrictions and the stipulations of their enforcement pointed to a new degree of control over the look and character of the neighborhood. If Nichols had originally been reluctant to impose restrictions and protective measures on his property for fear of encroaching on the private property rights of owners, by Armour Hills he had swung to the other extreme. "The accumulation of . . . overlooked violations," he warned in 1929, "may lead to the downfall of the whole character of the property."<sup>393</sup> Even legitimate requests were denied based on the principle of upholding restrictions. When one of the Country Club District's residents requested to build a tasteful glass porch on the side of his house so that his ill wife could have a comfortable view and exposure to sun, Nichols

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<sup>387</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 170-171.

<sup>388</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 174.

<sup>389</sup> JCN, Vol. 6, 157-160.

<sup>390</sup> JCN, Vol. 6, 158.

<sup>391</sup> Schirmer, *A City Divided*, 109.

<sup>392</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 132-133.

<sup>393</sup> Nichols, "A Developer's View of Deed Restrictions," 140, quoted in McKenzie, *Privatopia*, 41.

denied the request. “We did not feel we could afford to have a precedent of violation established even under these urgent circumstances.”<sup>394</sup>

The unveiling of Armour Hills also pointed to the explicit racial undertones that Nichols adopted during the 1920s. In a “city of homes” that prided its majority white population as symbol of its “American-ness,” Kansas City was a place where neighborhood character was a growing concern for white homeowners after the national race riots of 1919. While Kansas City’s color line had become increasingly evident since the turn of the century, especially in the neighborhoods around Eighteenth and Vine, the onset of the ‘20s ushered in a new stage of geographic anxieties. Kansas City’s black population would grow by twenty-six percent thanks to migration from the south, prompting a new degree of animosity from many white, middle-class homeowners who increasingly viewed black bodies as a threat to their property values.<sup>395</sup> Black spatial isolation might have been no worse in Kansas City than it was in most northern cities, but the anxiety surrounding race was some of nation’s most acute. In 1925, the Federal Council of Churches reported that Kansas City, along with Detroit and Cleveland, was experiencing some of the worst racial tension in the country, largely because of conflicts over housing.<sup>396</sup> White homeowners on Kansas City’s East Side interpreted the sight of overcrowding and bad sanitation and building conditions as an outcome of racial presence—an appalling yet typical assumption that some defensive homeowners used to motivate and justify bombing attempts.<sup>397</sup>

Unequal economic conditions had kept most blacks (and many whites, for that matter) from being able to afford the sorts of homes in Nichols’ developments in the first place, but the racialized rhetoric was an irresistible marketing tactic for developers like Nichols who were only happy to exploit racist associations for the purposes of selling new homes in areas free of “undesirable” people.<sup>398</sup> Nichols aimed to sell Armour Hills as a place where white, middle-class homeowners could be assured that their hard-earned investments would be protected from the presence of black neighbors. (Other Kansas City neighborhoods close to the city’s increasingly bold color line even copied Nichols’ model.<sup>399</sup>) The “surroundings ideal for wholesome home-life” and protection against the “undesirable purchaser” were code for an all-white, owner-occupied residency that was assumed to be optimal for the simultaneous rearing of children and engendering of patriotism. It was not for nothing that the Nichols Company placed, at the Wornall Road entrance to Armour Hills, a marble statue depicting an American eagle supporting two cherub-like children—figures that embodied “patriotism and child life as the foundation of the American home.”<sup>400</sup>

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The Armour Hills statue was more than a symbol of patriotic and social values. It was part of a larger landscaping program that showed the extent of Nichols’ mantra that “[b]eauty always pays in the

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<sup>394</sup> Nichols, *A Developer’s View*, 140n2.

<sup>395</sup> *Citizens’ League Bulletin*, January 26, 1924; cited in Sherry Lamb Schirmer, *Landscape of Denial: Space, Status and Gender in the Construction of Racial Perceptions among White Kansas Citizens, 1900–1958*. PhD Dissertation, University of Kansas, 1995, 148.

<sup>396</sup> *Kansas City Call*, December 18, 1925. (Check this source) Cited in Sherry Lamb Schirmer, “Landscape of Denial: Space, Status and Gender in the Construction of Racial Perceptions Among White Kansas Citizens, 1900–1958,” PhD Dissertation, University of Kansas, 1995, 181.

<sup>397</sup> Schirmer, *A City Divided*, 101-107.

<sup>398</sup> Charles E. Coulter, *“Take Up the Black Man’s Burden”: Kansas City’s African-American Communities, 1865-1939* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006). 257.

<sup>399</sup> Schirmer, *A City Divided*, 110.

<sup>400</sup> JCN, Vol. 7, 159, 163.

end.”<sup>401</sup> In Europe, Nichols had found a sense of gravitas and continuity in artistic features like fountains and statuary that graced public spaces and parks, and during his 1920s excursions, he began to bring home more than inspiration. Aware that his developments needed a cohering element whose style would resonate with upper-middle class tastes and their propensity for clothing the new in the style of the old, Nichols began purchasing countless works of classical art to tuck into nearly every corner of his neighborhoods.

A half-a-million-dollar investment in such artworks during the ‘20s and ‘30s underwrote some of the most extensive landscape beautification in any American district.<sup>402</sup> Upscale suburban areas nationwide had often featured elegant landscape decorations—a statue here, a fountain there—but none had ever featured such a cohesive and extensive network of artworks, most genuine artefacts of Carrara or Etruscan marble purchased by Nichols himself on Europe tours during the 1920s.<sup>403</sup> Turning off of Ward Parkway onto any side street would lead motorists through flanking muses, urns, herms, eagles, and columns. Streets across the district led to parklets dotted with cherubs, crowned maidens, lions, and other mythological creatures. And along the entire length of Ward Parkway, the broad median was graced with fountains, well heads, balustrades, friezes, iron gates, and columns.<sup>404</sup> One resident even waxed poetic on a set of six small Chinese figures, each playing an instrument, placed in a semicircle at the intersection of Mission Drive and Indian Lane in Mission Hills in 1921.<sup>405</sup>

After much roving,  
The Chinese musicians  
Wearied of traveling;  
Found the place of their dreams  
On a suburban driveway  
In a miniature park  
Under a spreading tree.<sup>406</sup>

Nichols, Delk, and collaborating landscape architect S. Herbert Hare knew that the statues and forms themselves were only half of the beautifying equation; equally important was the overall ensemble of environment and statuary. “Grades, surroundings, light, shadow, approach, scale, and almost the very atmosphere itself enter into the successful placing of such ornaments,” claimed Nichols in 1924.<sup>407</sup> Indeed, if many neighborhoods would have become cluttered and rendered gaudy by oversized artefacts that were too conspicuous, the Country Club District was a domain in which stone and marble forms were more graceful than grandiose. In contrast to the City Beautiful ethos of monumental classicism and its representation of civic glory, here was an allusion to the ancients that was softened and subordinated. The main event, after all, was the individual and collective grandeur of the private homes and their sweeping lawns.

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<sup>401</sup> *Kansas City Star* (April 2, 1928).

<sup>402</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 120-121.

<sup>403</sup> Nichols had purchased some one hundred artworks himself on a 1922 trip to Europe, where he both attended international housing conferences and undertook the personal study of several landscapes, including the squares of Spain, the hillside villas of Italy, the garden cities of England, the orderly cities of Germany, and the proportioned dimensions of Paris. See JCN, Vol. 6, 129-132.

<sup>404</sup> JCN, Vol. 6, 75; Vol. 7: 165-172.

<sup>405</sup> JCN, Vol. 6, 43; Vol. 7, 65-68.

<sup>406</sup> Frances Coffin Boaz, “The Chinese Musicians,” reprinted in JCN, Vol. 6, 44.

<sup>407</sup> J. C. Nichols, “Suburban Sub-divisions with Community Features,” Washington, DC, June 1924, SHSMO-KC.

While that sense of balance was apparent across the district, two landscapes stood out. In October 1924, the *Country Club District Bulletin* announced that eight Carrara marble vases acquired from Cesare Della Seta of Rome, Italy, had been mounted on the newly built, low rock walls that formed a circular barrier around the expansive circumference of Meyer Circle, a traffic circle 325 in diameter formed by the joining of Ward Parkway and Meyer Boulevard in 1924.<sup>408</sup> Meyer Circle might have been the southwestern-most intersection in the city's boulevard network, but Nichols saw to it that this peripheral nexus would become an aesthetic focal point.<sup>409</sup>



Figure 15: Meyer Circle Fountain in June 1932.  
*P1, No. 7, MVSC, KCPL*

The vases were only the beginning of Nichols' total plan. In 1925, the Nichols Company developed the circle into a major showpiece by placing a three-hundred-year-old Carrara marble fountain featuring two tiers of cherubs and seahorses in the center of a circular pool a hundred feet in diameter. (Figure 15) The fountain, which sprayed jets of water from the mouths of the three outward facing horses, was placed on limestone blocks and showered by sixteen nozzles that circled it, giving the scene an effect at once graceful and centripetal—appropriate for a grand traffic circle from which six separate streets radiated.<sup>410</sup>

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<sup>408</sup> "Fountain and Other Statuary Selected for Meyer Circle and Ward Parkway" *Country Club District Bulletin* (June 1923), 4; "Carrara Marble Vases in Meyer Circle" *Country Club District Bulletin* (October 1924), 3. The article is careful to point out the genuine antiquity of these objects "a consular's certificate" signifying their use "in more than a hundred years at a villa near Pisa." "Of plain, simple design, they provide ornaments of exquisite grace and form. ...in keeping with the dignity of the decorative scheme."

<sup>409</sup> JCN, Vol. 7, 164.

<sup>410</sup> Tim Janike, *City of Art: Kansas City's Public Art* (Kansas City: Kansas City Star Books, 2001), 146-148.

Costing \$15,000 and weighing eight tons, the fountain was a gift of Nichols to the city.<sup>411</sup> And like Nichols previous “gifts,” it came with strings attached that would tie the city to the Country Club District. In accepting the statue, the Kansas City Park Board was charged with creating an art commission to advise in the future selection of new art works for the city’s parks and roadways. Kansas City’s most far-flung boulevard nexus, in other words, had set a new, officious standard for the city’s urban beauty. The stretches of road leading into the dramatic circle became the most elaborately decorated in the district, dotted with Venetian iron gates, marble benches, a hammered iron balustrade framed in Etruscan marble, and marble vases.<sup>412</sup> A drive down Ward Parkway into the curve of Meyer Circle made it easy to see why the American Institute of Architects called Ward Parkway “one of the ten best examples of landscape architecture in America” in 1930.<sup>413</sup>



Figure 16: Mission Hills’ Verona Columns in 1932.  
*P21, Box 1, Folder 7, No. 7, MVSC, KCPL*

Meyer’s Circle’s grand dimensions were clearly intended as an easily accessible focal point for both local residents and visitors, but equally elegant spaces were also found deep within the neighborhoods.<sup>414</sup> In the early 1920s, Nichols sent landscape architect S. Herbert Hare on a European treasure hunt to find a suitable set of art objects for an area in Mission Hills that would become that

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<sup>411</sup> JCN, Vol. 7, 192-194

<sup>412</sup> JCN, Vol. 7, 165-172.

<sup>413</sup> Janice Lee, David Boutros, Charlotte R. White, and Deon Wolfenbarger, eds., *A Legacy of Design: A Historical Survey of the Kansas City, Missouri, Parks and Boulevards System, 1893-1940* (Kansas City, MO: Kansas City Center for Design Education and Research and the Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Kansas City, 1995), 251-256.

<sup>414</sup> “A Fountain May be Placed on Wornall Road,” *Country Club District Bulletin* (June 1923), 3; Nichols makes clear that his company is “endeavoring, so far as possible, to place [art objects] near or along important highways in the District, where they may be enjoyed by the greatest number of passerby, as well as become a distinctive part of Kansas City’s beauty spots.

subdivision's aesthetic showpiece. Armed with topographical maps of the small valley nestled at the intersection of Overhill Road and Ensley Lane, Hare returned with eight Salomonic columns of pink Verona marble, as well as an antique Roman fountain and a Florentine vase of Carrara marble—all of which he organized around a long reflecting pool. (Figure 16) Hare and Nichols even gave the columns a striking backdrop to round out the classical theme; two Italianate homes, designed by Delk, were constructed on the hillside above as a visual frame for the space that would come to signify Mission Hills.<sup>415</sup> As the *Country Club District Bulletin* wrote of the reassembly of ancient forms in the city's newest neighborhood, "The [Nichols Company] believes that Verona Columns compares favorably with many of the things to be found in the famous capitals of Europe—which have enjoyed the study and achievement of centuries of effort."

Like Meyer Circle and the various other spaces that Nichols tucked into the parks and medians of the Country Club District, the Verona Columns were intended to become signifiers not only of the Country Club District's elegance, but that of Kansas City as a whole. "Verona Columns is but another step in a definite plans of the Nichols Companies to co-operate to make Kansas City not only one of the world's most beautiful cities, but to make it abound with distinctive works of art, wonderful residential areas, artistic landscape development, happy blending of rural and urban scenes—drawing travelers not alone from the United States, but from all the world, to visit and enjoy a thriving commercial city of the West, where the hearts of the people love and revere the beautiful and the more worth-while things in life."<sup>416</sup> Such statements were whimsical and grandiose, yet they also pointed to the Nichols Company's interest—unprecedented among suburban builders—to create a suburban residential landscape that was synonymous with its home city.



Figure 17: A statue along Ward Parkway at Sixty-Ninth Street, with the Armour Fields subdivision in the background, in 1930.

*P21, Box 1, Folder 6, No. 3, MCSC, KCPL*

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<sup>415</sup> In a letter dated September 4, 1945, Nichols notes that "you will notice that we erected two houses of Italian design to create a background for this group." "This has been one of the most admired groupings of objects of art ever placed in the District, being a part of some half million dollars' worth of art objects that our company has expended in old world objects of art and placed throughout the Country Club District." Letter in KC0106, Box 164, Folder 6.

<sup>416</sup> "Verona Columns a Beauty Spot in Southern Mission Hills," *Country Club District Bulletin*, Vol. 5, no. 15; JCN, Vol. 8, 35-45.



If the Verona Columns were, as the *Kansas City Star Magazine* described, “redolent of woodland fancies,” other installations has less dramatic effects, particularly given the newness of some of the landscape.<sup>417</sup> In the southern stretches of Ward Parkway, for instance, the urns placed in the medians looked awkward given the barren appearance of the new subdivisions, which, like so many suburban neighborhoods of today, were built on treeless sites and then landscaped with scrawny saplings that had to be tied down in order to stand straight. Yet Nichols was known to have an eye for the distant future; he and his colleagues certainly knew that as soon as the vegetation grew and their neighborhoods seasoned, the appearance of the artworks would transform. (Figure 17)

The future that Nichols glimpsed explained his peripheral beautification project in another way. In an age when car ownership was rising steadily, more and more visitors would be entering Kansas City via highways rather than by train. That meant that they would, more likely than not, be entering the city through suburban areas that were still like the one that had preceded his development—landscapes choked by “unsightly rubbish dumps; piles of junked automobiles; screaming billboards; abandoned rock quarries, hot dog stands, and a heterogeneous mass of incongruous property.” Elements like those introduced visitors to the city “through a line of ugliness rather than one of beauty and order,” and equated to receiving guests “through your coal chute.”<sup>418</sup> The grand stretches of Ward Parkway and Meyer Boulevard, on the other hand, served as elegant gateways to Kansas City.

If America’s most meticulously planned agglomeration of subdivisions was unified by classical elegance, another theme was technological sophistication. As one geographer writes, the Country Club District’s hallmark was its blending of tradition with technology—two components that were on conspicuous display in the “electric house,” a model home unveiled in late 1922 by the Nichols Company at 117 West Sixty-fifth Terrace in Armour Fields. (Figure 18) “Model homes” had referred to idealized plans on paper before 1920, but during the Jazz Age they became a concrete reality.<sup>419</sup> The Nichols Company model was a home where electricity reached out to every comfort and pervaded the “intimate side of family life” from “cellar to garret.” Electrical wiring made every facet of life more convenient, more aesthetically pleasing, and more technologically sophisticated. Abundant outlets and wiring for telephones and radio systems would be combined with an illuminated house number, an electric range, dishwasher, ceiling lights, washing machine, sewing machine, phonograph, mixer, percolator, toaster, waffle iron, grill, curling iron, hair drier, milk warmer, and even a strategically placed electric fan over the ironing area. It was easy to see why Kansas City Power and Light was so frequently telling readers of the *Kansas City Star*, *The Independent*, and countless other publications that “the home of the future will be all electric.”<sup>420</sup>

Devised not only for showing off the benefits of electrical products and proactive electrical planning, the electric house was also “planned to meet the needs of a family of good taste.” The benefits of technology, after all, were not incompatible with traditional and elegant style—a fact demonstrated by the “broad and massive, yet simple” Georgian facade that was tempered by a “delicious harmony” of “softer tone colors” on the interior.<sup>421</sup> This blend of “taste and technology” became a mark of all the district’s homes from 1922 onwards, offering well-to-do housewives relief from the typical drudgery of household chores (in an era when servants were becoming less common)

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<sup>417</sup> *The Kansas City Star Magazine* 2 (October 18, 1925), 7.

<sup>418</sup> Quoted in Rose, “There is Less Smoke in the District,” 44.

<sup>419</sup> Worley, J. C. *Nichols*, 211-213; Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home: Domestic Architecture and Moral Conflict in Chicago, 1873-1913* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 1-4.

<sup>420</sup> For a typical advertisement, see *Future* 1, no. 10 (March 15, 1935): 3.

<sup>421</sup> JCN, Vol. 6, 238-242.

alongside a sense of domestic sophistication and aesthetic virtue.<sup>422</sup> The feminine mystique, as Ruth Cowan points out, found its maturity in neighborhoods like those of the Country Club District during the 1920s.<sup>423</sup>



Figure 18: People lined up for tours of the Electric House in Armour Hills in November 1922.

*J. C. Nichols Company Scrapbooks, Vol. 6, 240. SHSMO-KC*

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That the Country Club District had a bigger impact than any other previous area of the city on elite social geography owed much to another unique feature: its carefully planned inclusion of social, religious, and educational institutions. Nichols knew that getting homeowners to stay put would require the creation of a holistic sense of community—something that was only possible with the development of schools, churches, and social clubs as part of the landscape.

Any area that promised a wholesome environment for children had to boast excellent schools, and by the end of the 1923 school year, the district's seven private and public schools enrolled a total of 2,361 students—a number that spurred discussions about overcrowding.<sup>424</sup> The next year, the Barstow School, one of the city's oldest and most respected schools, moved its campus to the Country Club District from downtown, joining several other elite institutions, including the Country Day School, the Sunset Hill School, and the Pembroke School.<sup>425</sup> Nichols even pushed for the construction of what would become the city's most elite public high school. Built in 1927 at Sixty-Fifth Street and Wornall Road along the Country Club Streetcar line, Southwest High School boasted an impressive, four-story facade of red brick trimmed in cut white limestone and a grand, central colonnade whose

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<sup>422</sup> Rose, "There is Less Smoke in the District," 46, 49.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

<sup>424</sup> JCN, Vol. 7, 10.

<sup>425</sup> Coleman, *The Kansas City Establishment*, 262.

cornice was dotted with four elegant finials. Southwest accommodated an immediate enrollment of seven to eight hundred students, and had room for an eventual three-thousand pupils.<sup>426</sup>



Figure 19: Country Club Christian Church overlooking the Mirror Pond at Ward Parkway and Sixty-First Terrace.  
*General Photograph Collection, MVSC, KCPL*

Churches were another key addition to the social landscape, and some eight congregations, representing the full spectrum of Christian denominations, called the Country Club District home by 1930.<sup>427</sup> These included typical bastions of Protestant privilege (St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Central United Methodist Church, Country Club Congregational, and Second Presbyterian Church), as well as a prominent Catholic parish, the Church of the Visitation. Of all the new seats of worship, however, it was Country Club Christian Church, inaugurated by Nichols himself along with twelve other Kansas City millionaires, which functioned as the district's ecclesiastical focal point. Looming over the stretch of Ward Parkway just opposite the mirror pond (at Sixty-Third Street), the church was constructed of limestone in a gothic revival style, and featured a broad, imposing facade and a hefty tower capped with gothic finials. (Figure 19)

Country Club Christian was aptly named not only because it was in a similarly named district, but because many of its congregants—like those of the other churches—were members of the multiple country clubs that had come to trace the outer contours of the district. Upscale recreation was a hallmark of exclusive developments, and the simultaneous exclusivity and scale of the Country Club District was reflected in the growth of its golf courses. The Mission Hills Country Club had originated in 1913 as Mission Hills' only course, but by 1930 it had been joined by the Kansas City Country Club (moved from the site of Loose Park in 1926) and the Community Golf Club (later

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<sup>426</sup> JCN, Vol. 7, 262-263.

<sup>427</sup> JCN, Vol. 7, 197.

Indian Hills) in 1919. By 1923, there were four, eighteen-hole courses in the district.<sup>428</sup> The Armour Fields Golf Course, originally located near Meyer Circle, had to increase its course to eighteen holes after extreme demand.<sup>429</sup>



Figure 20: Boys launching model sailboats in the boat race on Ward Parkway's mirror pond in the mid-1920s.

*Glass Slide Collection, Kansas City Public Schools, Department of Visual Instruction (P21), Box 1, Folder 2, No. 72, MVSC, KCPL*



Figure 21: Maypoles at the 1923 Community Field Day.

*J. C. Nichols Company Scrapbooks, Vol. 7, SHSMO-KC*

<sup>428</sup> Avis Alexander, "The Country Club District: The Golfer's Paradise," *The Western Golfer* 2, no. 5 (December 1923): 2-3; copy in JCN, Vol. 7, 95-96; JCN, Vol. 7, 131.

<sup>429</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 112; see also Coleman, *The Kansas City Establishment*, 262.

Events were as important to Nichols' new social landscape as were physical places, and it was hard to ignore the range of activities that came with a mortgage in the Country Club District. (Figure 20) More than any developer before him, Nichols worked to sponsor events and activities that would boost a sense of community pride and thereby stoke interest in his neighborhood. The Nichols Company sponsored activities like naturalism lectures, birdhouse design contests, country hikes, and lawn beautification projects to highlight the presence and benefits of nature in his district. Each April, a flower show at the Brookside Community Hall prompted residents to show off the best spring blooms from their lawns and gardens. At Christmastime, organized carol singing and front-lawn lighting aimed to create "a remarkable interest in this sentimental time of the year."<sup>430</sup>

The largest event, however, was the meticulously orchestrated "community field day," begun in 1921 and held each May to bring together children from the district's schools for a day of playful spectacle on the grounds of the Pembroke Hill School on Ward Parkway. The day's events commenced with a band-led parade down the hillside approaching the school grounds, "each school grouped by itself, following its banner, [and] an effort made that all the children in each group dress in their own particular color." The ensuing competition involved kids as young as six and as old as eighteen, and featured everything from sack races to tug-of-war to dashes, may-pole dances, and pole vaults, all watched by mothers, fathers, and other relatives, who could purchase programs, lawn chairs, and refreshments for the day-long event. By the mid-1920s, this annual event involved over three thousand students from eleven schools, and over five thousand spectators.<sup>431</sup> (Figure 21)

These events were intended, of course, to intensify residents' pride in their neighborhood. But they were as much a covert way to advertise the Country Club District as a superior part of Kansas City. The Nichols Company always made a point to invite individuals listed on their "prospect list." And when Nichols sponsored an essay contest in the city's schools in 1919 around the topic of "Why Father and Mother Should Own Their Own Home," (with the first prize winner getting his or her photo published in the *Kansas City Star*), it was doubtless to draw every middle-class parent's attention to the city's southern edge.<sup>432</sup>

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When J. C. Nichols returned from a European trip in 1922, he gushed about his admiration for the prosperous condition of the rebuilt German landscape. "I have never seen a country," he claimed, "where there are so many fine houses and barns being built, practically on every farm," and where "the houses were newly painted, the gardens well kept and the lawns mowed." "I have never seen better dressed farmers or a more general appearance of prosperity."<sup>433</sup> That idyllic impression, he could say by 1930, had been successfully recreated on the southern edge of Kansas City. If the Country Club District's dominance as the elite district of Kansas City had been evident before World War I, by 1930 it was a statistical certainty. In 1915, the area had housed some thirty percent of the city's elites compared to Hyde Park's sixty-five percent. By 1930, those numbers were nearly inverted, with sixty percent of the city's in-crowd calling the Country Club District home.<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>430</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 277-282; Nichols, "Suburban Sub-Divisions With Community Features."

<sup>431</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 277-282; Nichols, "Suburban Sub-Divisions With Community Features"; JCN, Vol. 6, 201-204; Vol. 7, 5-9. At some point during the late '20s, the event was moved to the grounds of Southwest High School.

<sup>432</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 277-282.

<sup>433</sup> J. C. Nichols, "European Trip," Speech, KC106, Number 11, SHSMO-KC.

<sup>434</sup> Coleman, *The Kansas City Establishment*, 266.

But the Country Club District was more than the new hub of Kansas City's elites. As it grew by leaps and bounds in both size and reputation, it became as iconic a piece of the cityscape as Union Station, the Liberty Memorial, or even the Parks and Boulevards. By 1940, when it had grown by a factor of five to encompass 5,000 acres, it was accurately touted by boosters as "the largest contiguous restricted residential district of any city in the United States."<sup>435</sup> That scale made it impossible not to consider it a major piece of the Kansas City landscape, and real estate developers and city planners from as far away as England and Japan sent cohorts to observe the features of what seemed to be a realized utopian experiment. As one London based writer described, "in contrast with the beanstalk nature of many American towns, the terrific domination of efficiency, and the absence of those graces which we [in England] have taken hundreds of years to make natural to use, the Country Club Estate is a haunt of such peace and beauty, such an embodiment of ideas of home and happy leisure, that America has yet hardly had time to develop that it makes the European visitor gasp with a surprised delight."<sup>436</sup>

These accolades made it unsurprising that Kansas City's most successful developer took center stage as one of America's most influential "community builders." Before World War I, Nichols had become a key figure in the development and governance of the National Council on City Planning and the National Association of Real Estate Brokers. His involvements only expanded after the end of the War. He was called on to give countless speeches at major national and international city planning conferences. He penned numerous articles in major textbooks and journals designed to educate the new class of realtor-planners that Nichols himself championed as messiahs of good city form.<sup>437</sup> In his examples, he reliably invoked the aesthetic and legal contours of Kansas City's prime residential area. In 1944, Nichols and Houston-based developer Hugh Potter spearheaded the Community Builders' Council, the first such division of the Urban Land Institute, the "independent research agency" devoted to the study of urban growth.<sup>438</sup>

That Kansas City, Missouri, had shaped the nation's most influential figure in developing landscapes "planned for permanence" would have shocked the nineteenth-century writers who had found Kansas City's character largely defined by its rowdy and ramshackle appearance. Yet as the Country Club District graced the pages of national journals like *Good Housekeeping*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*, it became increasingly clear that there was a new foil for the bawdy reputation that had long dominated Kansas City's outward image.

The Country Club District represented the apotheosis of what a historian describes as the "changes at the high end" that reformed the residential development of expensive, single-family homes during the 1920s.<sup>439</sup> In cities across America—in Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia—the Jazz Age witnessed subdivisions for the affluent transform the suburban domain. And while the restrictions, architectural standards, and new technologies were not unique to Kansas City's prized landscape, Nichols' synthesis of land control techniques and aesthetic standards on such a large scale put the Country Club District in a class by itself.

Perhaps that was inevitable, though. The most incisive community builder in the country, after all, possessed an imperialist mindset that could rival that of Kansas City's most ardent nineteenth-

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<sup>435</sup> "Industrial Statistics of of Greater Kansas City," (Kansas City, MO: Industry-Trade Department of the Chamber of Commerce, 1939), 18.

<sup>436</sup> Quoted in "Business and Pleasure to Combine at the Kansas City Meeting," *American Bar Association Journal* 23, no. 8 (August 1937): 588.

<sup>437</sup> See Nichols, "Town Planning," in *Real Estate Handbook*, ed. Blake Snyder (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1925), 359-366; Weiss, *The Rise of the Community Builders*, 64-72.

<sup>438</sup> McKenzie, *Privatopia*, 10, 60; Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 91-92.

<sup>439</sup> Weiss, *The Rise of the Community Builders*, 2.

century boosters.<sup>440</sup> He championed the city's forays into impressive downtown architecture and monuments. He pushed for the maturation of its artistic industries and institutions. During his career, he was a major fixture in the building of the Liberty Memorial, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, and countless other fixtures of the Kansas City landscape. In the city's agricultural prominence and burgeoning industry, he saw a potential for Kansas City to become a major urban center of the United States on par with Chicago and New York.<sup>441</sup> For all his influence in standardizing a practice across the United States, he was at heart a local man devoted first and foremost to enhancing his city's greatness.

Nichols might have pushed past the City Beautiful's original goals to seek a new paradigm, but at heart he was still as much a proponent of urban grandeur as the Progressivists of the 1890s. Even in the mid-1920s, with his new approach running full throttle, Nichols invoked City Beautiful giant Daniel Burnham in the climax of a speech outlining the hallmarks of community building: "Make no little plans for your city. Small plans die and are soon forgotten. Big plans grip the souls of men, stir the blood of the people, and once diagrammed for the future of a city, recur again and again throughout the city's growth and guide its future destiny and become the beacon light for beauty and order throughout every part of the city."<sup>442</sup>

Burnham's now famous words might have been appropriated for a markedly different vision, but their sense of grandeur as well as the notion of "guiding the future destiny" of the city rang more true for Nichols' new City Beautiful than it ever did with the old. In a city whose rowdy frontier reputation had rested on its embrace of unbridled capitalism (evident in particular during the tumultuous 1870s and '90s), Nichols introduced a conservative brand of commerce geared towards long-term stability and the slow and steady appreciation of value.<sup>443</sup> And while Kessler, Nelson, and others who preceded him had advocated for and in many respects produced a city of enhanced elegance, it was Nichols who fully delivered on his promises to create an intractable landscape of beauty that was virtually immune to disinvestment. No one who meandered through the drives and boulevards of the Country Club District, and saw the extent of its reach and the scale of its success, could argue that the "city of homes" was a fair descriptor of Kansas City. Under Nichols—and to an extent unmatched in any other city at the time—suburban prosperity had become Kansas City's grandest civic fixture.

### ***The Mediterranean Marketplace***

If the period after World War I saw Kansas City's Country Club District come into its own as a substantial physical and symbolic portion of the urban landscape, it was not simply because of the scale of the neighborhoods, the extent of the aesthetic treatments, and the intensity of the community development. So too was it because of a pathbreaking commercial development—a "new business district" that Nichols built at the threshold between the old city and his new suburban domain.

Planned for some ten years but not begun until 1922, the fifteen-acre Country Club Plaza was announced via a full-page article in the *Kansas City Star* complete with a rendering of one of the

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<sup>440</sup> "He Didn't Stop with his Vision," *Future* 1, no. 24: 8; Kory Paul Gallagher, "Creating an Imperial City: Kansas City in the 1920s," (MA thesis, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2011), 126-165.

<sup>441</sup> See J. C. Nichols, "Country Club Plaza," Undated Speech, SHSMO-KC; "Opening of William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art and Mary Atkins Museum of Fine Arts," Speech, Kansas City, Missouri, December 11, 1933, SHSMO-KC.

<sup>442</sup> Nichols, "Suburban Sub-divisions with Community Features," 9.

<sup>443</sup> Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 68.

strangest plans yet for any American city: a shopping district cast in the aesthetic guise of a Spanish village but promising “a new standard in America for outlying business sections.”<sup>444</sup> Those who knew Nichols would not have been surprised at what they saw. Thanks to his travels abroad, Nichols was enamored with the old market squares of Europe, with their seasoned and well-maintained architecture, vibrant street life, and a small-scale that balanced bustle with intimacy. Yet as a devoted disciple of the American dogma of profit and growth, he also wanted to create a place that would be as much a commercial machine as an aesthetic delight.

These allegiances were reconciled in a district that took shape not as a jumbled grouping of stand-alone stores or a small strip—the usual formats for outlying retail developments—but as a low-rise district five blocks wide and three blocks deep of architecturally unified shop buildings situated in a loose grid of wide streets. (Figure 22) Designed and built according to three prevailing considerations—attractiveness, convenience, and profitability—the Plaza was a commercial analogue of the neighborhoods to the south.<sup>445</sup> And in much the same way, it seemed on the surface to appeal more to tradition than modernity—an illusion that was quickly shattered by the slightest attention to how it reshaped and reorganized the Jazz Age retail experience.<sup>446</sup>

Suburban shopping was nothing new in the 1920s. Commercial clusters had been a key element of streetcar suburbs since the late nineteenth century, and the landmark suburban community of Riverside, Illinois, developed in 1869, included a small grouping of stores. So did some of the major speculative, philanthropic, and federally sponsored suburban developments of the early twentieth century, including Lake Forest, Illinois, Forest Hills Gardens, New York, and Yorkship Village in Camden, New Jersey.<sup>447</sup> Retail was not even new for Nichols; he too had placed three small shopping clusters (Brookside, Crestwood, and Colonial Shops) along the Country Club Car streetcar line.<sup>448</sup>

But where most suburban retail developments (including Nichols’) were modest in scale or organized to invoke old-fashioned market squares, the Plaza blended exotic and historicist aesthetics with an enthusiastic embrace of new technology and a novel spatial logic. The guiding consideration of that logic was the automobile. Unlike in downtown, which was becoming increasingly choked by the onslaught of cars, some fifty percent of the space in the Plaza area was dedicated to streets and parking. Roads were broad, with copious angled parking spaces along most storefronts. Forty-Seventh Street, the primary road leading into the Plaza’s interior blocks, was widened to one hundred feet, making it as broad as some of the city’s major boulevards. Parking was also accommodated by spacious parking lots and garages.

Nichols was as concerned with satisfying the tastes of the people who drove the new cars as he was with the cars themselves—a consideration that led him to create a shopping experience that was the negative image of the one downtown. In place of cacophonous bustle, visual dissonance, and a jumbled polyphony between the unloading and stocking of goods and flow of shoppers, the Plaza would offer a sense of order that was more harmonious. A height-limit of two stories would not only

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<sup>444</sup> “Millions in New Shops,” *Kansas City Star* (April 30, 1922), 12D. While it was announced in the early ‘20s, Nichols and his business property manager had begun buying up lots along the northern shore of Brush Creek since 1912. See Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 241-243.

<sup>445</sup> Rose, “There is No Smoke in the District,” 50.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>447</sup> Longstreth, “J. C. Nichols, the Country Club Plaza, and Notions of Modernity,” 127. Sam Bass Warner mentions shops at several points (although he does not devote a specific section to them) in *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962). For another description of streetcar suburb shopping, see James Borchert, “Visual Landscapes of a Streetcar Suburb,” in *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes*, ed. Paul Groth and Todd W. Bressi (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 39-40.

<sup>448</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 237, 239-240, 242, 252-253.



abate congestion on streets and sidewalks, but also allow for a brighter, more open shopping experience.<sup>449</sup> As “a commercial application of the principles of city planning ... which [Nichols] already has worked out in residential development,” aesthetic and spatial maintenance and control would be paramount concerns.<sup>450</sup> Height lines and setbacks were to be uniform. The common fixtures of the downtown street—the popcorn stand, signboard, and newsstand—were prohibited, as were the “dangerous and unsightly overhanging signs ... screaming advertising placards, hideous combinations of color, [and] great scrawling, flaming advertising lettering” that often adorned downtown shops.<sup>451</sup>



Figure 22: The initial Plaza buildings in the mid-1920s.  
*J. C. Nichols Company Scrapbooks, SHSMO-KC*

Designing the backs of shop buildings was as important as the storefronts, as Nichols wanted a complete separation of the flow of goods and people, as well as the total concealment of any unsightly components of the shopkeeping enterprise. Unloading docks and courts were all hidden behind buildings in spacious alleyways. Those alleys—many of which were disguised by decorative brick archways—were also where all trash and refuse would be collected. Sanitation and safety, after all, were equally paramount concerns: oil-fired burners were used for heating, mitigating the scent and sight of coal soot; automatic sprinkler systems ran along the ceilings in every building; and the typical snarl of overhead poles and wires was avoided by burying the utilities at a cost of nearly \$30,000.<sup>452</sup> The Plaza’s deep sidewalks were, as a result, remarkably calm, clean, and composed.

The most conspicuous feature of the new center, however, was its bold architectural theme. Nichols knew that “dull monotony” could easily result from too great a degree of spatial uniformity, and he and architects Edward Delk and Edward Tanner opted for a style that was sufficiently “elastic.” They found that pliability in the architecture of Spain and its colonies, which, unlike the relatively constrained Colonial, French, or Tudor formats that were also popular at the time, bore countless opportunities for variation. With its propensity for broken rooflines, chromatic tiling, ornate and

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<sup>449</sup> J. C. Nichols, “The Development of Outlying Shopping Centers,” Speech to the National Conference of City Planning, Buffalo, New York, May 20, 1929.

<sup>450</sup> “Millions in New Shops,” *Kansas City Star* (April 30, 1922), 12D.

<sup>451</sup> Nichols, “The Development of Outlying Shopping Centers.”

<sup>452</sup> Nichols, “Country Club Plaza.”

varied towers, and an overall “harmony of color” in its earth tones, Spanish architecture was a perfect font of ideas for a landscape that needed “architectural harmony” rather than uniformity, and in which style was at the service of spatial designs that were geared to bolster business. “The charm of weather stained stucco walls, or brick or concrete, in many harmonious tints; sun baked tiled roofs of harmonious colors, iron balconies with gay awnings, and the brilliant coloring under the wide, overhanging roofs, should,” Nichols explained, “give the district a character more unique of its kind than has, so far, been attempted in the United States.”<sup>453</sup>

That character, most crucially, would be both historicist and modern—reflecting the Jazz Age trademark of recalling the past while being geared towards the future. Spanish style had the quality of being both exotic as well as classical. And as an added bonus, the historical component of the chosen style was apropos for Kansas City; Spanish architecture recalled the city’s genuine and historic ties to the Santa Fe Trail and the Spanish-controlled “great Southwest.”<sup>454</sup>



Figure 23: The exterior of the Mill Creek Building.  
*J. C. Nichols Company Scrapbooks, SHSMO-KC*

The Mill Creek Building (1923) formally announced the pathbreaking aesthetic ethos. (Figure 23) Built at the corner of Forty-Seventh Street and Mill Creek Parkway and designed by Edward Delk, the new shop building was a broad, two-story structure with large, plate-glass windows and second-floor balconies that set a clear standard for the Plaza’s Spanish style. Aside from a roof tiled in “shades of apricot and Indian red” and warm-toned bricks, the style was traced by wrought-iron fixtures, colorful tiles, and a deep overhang supported by long corbels—all painted “gay with brilliant colors.”

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<sup>453</sup> Ibid., See also Richard Longstreth, “J. C. Nichols, the Country Club Plaza, and Notions of Modernity,” *Harvard Architectural Review* 5 (1986): 130-132.

<sup>454</sup> Nichols, “Country Club Plaza”; Longstreth, “J. C. Nichols, the Country Club Plaza, and Notions of Modernity,” 125. The books of the Nichols Company library reflected a meticulous study of Spanish architectural forms, and particularly that of smaller-scale buildings. Austin Whittlesey’s *The Minor Ecclesiastical, Domestic, and Garden Architecture of Southern Spain* (1917), for instance, was one of the volumes.

A broad belt course under the second story wore, at regular intervals, colorful flourishes of blue, green, and yellow, including fruit bowls and shields bearing the initials of the new development. The deep sidewalk was inscribed with rectangular flower beds planted with slender moline elms, and retractable, striped awnings provided shade from the afternoon sun.<sup>455</sup>

More buildings followed quickly. The Tower Building (1923), constructed corner-to-corner with the Mill Creek Building, gave the Plaza its first vertical ornament—a belfry-style tower of cordovan stucco complete with arched windows, rope columns, fluted finials, and acroterions.<sup>456</sup> One block down Forty-Seventh Street, the Balcony Building (1925) featured two corner towers and a central bay marked with a curved, Mission-style parapet decorated with an elaborate scallop, mascarón, and scrolled ivy. The rose-tinged stucco faintly echoed hues of the variegated tile roof, “a mottled surface of Burgundy, Spanish red, old rose and straw.” And like all of the Plaza’s buildings, the Balcony Building was an exercise in proportionality. “Although horizontal lines predominate” in Edward Tanner’s design, noted the *Country Club District Bulletin*, the building’s two towers provided “a striking vertical contrast” emphasized by the way in which their hipped roofs were topped with slender finials that terminated in gilded balls.<sup>457</sup>

Subsequent structures carried the Plaza’s footprint westward and its Spanish theme into more whimsical territory. For the Kansas City Gas Company Building (1929), Tanner traded stucco for variegated red brick, and organized the long facade around a central bay defined by a Palladian window, an arched sunburst of blue, yellow, and red tiles, and a gabled roofline marked off with terra cotta machicolations. The J. C. Nichols Company Building (1931), built along Ward Parkway, featured two short towers of broad proportions and gutsy, high-relief ornamentation in shades of orange, blue, and yellow. And across Alameda Road, the Plaza Bank of Commerce (1930) featured an octagonal corner tower whose dominating, ribbed dome was faced with ivory and green tiles and stamped with sunburst patterns of black and orange.

This was a striking cluster of buildings, yet those with an eye for architectural purity would notice quickly that while this free adaptation embraced Spanish-colonial materials and architectural features, it eschewed the style’s spatial hallmarks. Buff brick, stucco, red tiles, painted terracotta, and wrought iron clearly evoked the look of Spain, but the Plaza’s design boasted no central square, no shaded arcades, and no interior walkways—trademarks of many Spanish-colonial buildings. But spatial accuracy, then, was never one of Nichols’ goals. As a historian notes, “architectural precedent was never allowed to interfere with the creation of a productive machine for selling.”<sup>458</sup> Big squares would concentrate people in a landscape meant to disperse them along multiple streets of shops, and interior walkways took up square footage that could be used for retail space. As in the Nichols homes nearby, style was at the service of space and technology; a tried-and-true aesthetic was deployed as both a camouflage and a vehicle for a revolutionary blend of technologies. Put another way, this was a modern use of traditional style—a method that was concerned not with historical accuracy or intellectual titillation, but with efficiency, versatility, and productivity.<sup>459</sup>

That sense of efficiency and productivity was most clear in the district’s layout, which situated the buildings along a modified grid. Nichols despised the rigid grids that so often marked off the

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<sup>455</sup> “The First Unit in Country Club Plaza Group to be Completed in March,” *Country Club District Bulletin* 4, no. 11 (November 1922): 1.

<sup>456</sup> JCN, Vol. 7: 99, 126.

<sup>457</sup> “The Balcony Building in the Plaza,” *Country Club District Bulletin* (August 1925): 4.

<sup>458</sup> Longstreth, “J. C. Nichols, the Country Club Plaza, and Notions of Modernity,” 131-132.

<sup>459</sup> This deployment of style resonated with the contemporary practice of what Carolyn Loeb calls “entrepreneurial vernacular,” an emerging method of home building that was simultaneously flexible and controlled, and consequently produced planned landscapes that looked organic in composition. See Loeb, *Entrepreneurial Vernacular*, 5-9.

American city, yet he saw their potential in terms of creating a synergetic environment for the purposes of increasing retail revenue. If motorists had to drive past blocks of elegant shops on their way to a specific store, they would be more likely to browse and lengthen their shopping outings. The grid also allowed the Plaza to recall the scale and intimacy of smaller American towns, which, along with the atmosphere of the European town center evoked by the low-rise Spanish buildings, was undeniably appealing for suburbanites with prairie roots and worldly tastes. And where “intimacy and semi-seclusion” was one goal of the low-rise cluster of buildings and fine-grained aesthetic touches, another goal was of a center of unprecedented scale; the grid allowed the low-rise Plaza to spread over a large area without feeling unmanageable.<sup>460</sup>

Nichols believed in the ability of carefully designed surroundings to influence people’s views of beauty and value—their “mental and spiritual attitudes,” as he put it in a 1924 speech.<sup>461</sup> And those attitudes, so he thought, could be powerful catalyzers of a sense of community, especially in areas, like the Plaza, where there was public activity. For such design to be effective, however, it had to be pervasive. To situate a well-designed structure next to one that did not fit aesthetically was tantamount to failure. After all, such a jumbled appearance was a characteristic of the unplanned developments that he believed were a stain on the American city.



Figure 24: The Spanish-themed interior of the Plaza Bank of Commerce.  
*J. C. Nichols Company Scrapbooks, SHSMO-KC*

To walk into any number of these Plaza’s shops or offices would underscore the full reality of Nichols’ and Delk’s notion of “total design.” Customers entering the Plaza Bank of Commerce were surrounded by walls resembling “mellow parchment,” a touch that accorded with the rust-colored, tile floor and the coffered wood ceiling from which hung star-shaped, Moorish lanterns. (Figure 24) The

<sup>460</sup> “Millions in New Shops,” *Kansas City Star* (April 30, 1922), 12D.

<sup>461</sup> Nichols, “Suburban Sub-divisions with Community Features.”

bank's oversized vault ("for excellent provision of safe deposit requirements") sat behind a richly ornamented teller counter faced with tiles and ornate ironwork.<sup>462</sup> In the Plaza Delicatessen, which prided itself on providing both "imported and domestic foodstuffs," diners sat at solid oak tables under a festive awning after ordering their meals at a counter where rows of jars on the back shelves and glass candy jars sat beneath an overhang made of stained wood and red tiles.<sup>463</sup> And in the elegant Hunter Brothers Drug Store, small wooden tables echoed the elaborate, glass-fronted wood cabinets that lined the walls as well as the soda fountain, which was faced with decorative wood paneling. The interior, painted in "a French green," was splashed with bright renderings of the Spanish coat of arms.<sup>464</sup>

In many stores, these scrupulous aesthetic touches were married to a clear implementation of new technologies in ways that made plain that these were the best appointed and outfitted shops in the city.<sup>465</sup> When the high-end Wolferman's Grocery Store opened next door to the Tower Building in early 1924, it immediately demonstrated this theme. "Corn colored stucco" walls, a cornice painted with "fresh greens and lavenders," and polychrome trim of the main entrance gave way to a spacious interior, "practically flooded with daylight," finished in "gray and deep ivory, with a touch of black and orange." (Figure 25) And while quaint decorations of "fowls and fruits" graced the transoms of the show windows, the Bake Shop and Sausage Rooms at the back of the store featured modern finishings of white tiles and ceilings painted in gloss enamel—surfaces that complemented the white enamel and nickel appliances. At the rear of the store, a huge incinerator burned every piece of packaging and trash, and a large, covered loading platform capable of accommodating at least a half a dozen trucks protected food from the elements.<sup>466</sup>



Figure 14: The spacious and bright interior of Wolferman's.  
*J. C. Nichols Company Scrapbooks, SHSMO-KC*

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<sup>462</sup> JCN, Vol. 10, 138-139.

<sup>463</sup> JCN, Vol. 6 or 7, 83-84.

<sup>464</sup> JCN, Vol. 7, 49-50.

<sup>465</sup> "Wolferman's Country Club Plaza Store a Masterpiece," *Country Club District Bulletin* 4, no. 3 (March 1924), 3.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*; JCN, Vol. 7: 123-125.

Other stores boasted the same sense of tastefully rendered, modernized space. Mrs. M. C. Chisholms' millinery shop offered patrons a roomy and bright experience where they could be served without being rushed.<sup>467</sup> Her customers tried on hats in one of five, semi-private stalls. Outfitted with long mirrors that were bordered with drapes and topped with valances, these roomy nooks were lined up under a row of transom windows that showered light into the shop. In Mrs. McGavran's salon, run by a pioneer in the legal regulation of Missouri beauty shops, clients could avoid the common experience of shuffling between cramped spaces for different services; seven large stalls were fully equipped to handle the full range of services.<sup>468</sup> And in the Jane Nichols Lingerie Shop, one of Kansas City's first "to cater exclusively to fine lingerie, leisure robes and bedding," customers entered to find not a typical store, but a space styled as a domestic environment, organized and decorated as a Colonial style living room complete with a fireplace.<sup>469</sup>

The prospect of roomy, bright, technologically sophisticated, and tastefully rendered spaces—all in an optimal location for patronage by Kansas City's prime consumption classes—drew many businesses to relocate to the Plaza. Miss Reineke's Photographs, whose owner was known as one of the city's best family photographers, gave up her downtown studio on Walnut Street to move south when the Plaza opened to be in "a better position to care for her patrons, who include besides children, many of the leading business men of Kansas City."<sup>470</sup> Miss Reineke might have been among the first downtown business owners to jump ship for the promising suburban district, but she was far from the last. The Wilkie Furniture Company followed suit in late 1925, and over the next twenty years, countless business owners decided to either move their stores to the Plaza or to open or move their second branches there.<sup>471</sup> And not all were moving from downtown to the suburbs to capture the area's affluent clientele; some, like the Green-Crane Photography Studio, were moving from the less patronized suburban shopping areas deep within the Country Club District north to the Plaza.<sup>472</sup>

Arriving at the Plaza promised shoppers more than an aesthetically heightened retail or service experience. The Plaza also went further than any place before in aestheticizing the processes of storing and caring for automobiles. Garages, gas stations, and parking lots were often greasy and unflattering additions to the urban landscape in the initial decades of car ownership, even as they were becoming a mainstay of the American city. Yet even as downtown architects were giving parking garages sophisticated touches, the Plaza's accommodation of automobiles appeared to be as much aesthetic as spatial. Nichols had his architects extend the total design concept to encompass the Plaza's two garages, eight gas stations, and two parking lots.

The Plaza Garage, built in 1923 behind the Mill Creek Building and designed by Delk, had space for 125 cars, and included the latest features of any modern facility: five electric garage doors, fireproof construction, and mechanics who could perform all types of repair work, including tire changes and battery charging services. Intended for use by both Plaza patrons and the residents of the nearby apartment buildings, the Plaza Garage demonstrated a defining ideal of Nichols' approach and one that would become standard for many upscale suburban developments: aesthetic continuity in spite of disparate use. The interior of the garage was a functional cage of steel and concrete, but the exterior was faced with stucco and marked with finials along the roofline so that it would be an integral piece of the architectural ensemble.<sup>473</sup>

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<sup>467</sup> JCN, Vol. 6, 263.

<sup>468</sup> JCN, Vol. 6, 264, 267.

<sup>469</sup> JCN, Vol. 7, 57.

<sup>470</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>471</sup> See issues of *The Independent* from 1929; Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 251.

<sup>472</sup> JCN, Vol. 10, 227.

<sup>473</sup> JCN, Vol. 6, 260-261.

Demand necessitated another structure in short order, and the Plaza Garage was quickly joined by the Ward Parkway Garage, a 1928 structure of similar style that accommodated a further 210 vehicles and contained a gas station within its walls. The greater capacity of the new building was clear in its long and low-slung profile, which was rendered in the Spanish aesthetic by iron light fixtures and balconies, archways, and a prominent, textured parapet marked off with long finials.<sup>474</sup> (Figure 26)

The Plaza's "beautiful and clean" gas stations were equally impressive in their aesthetic treatments.<sup>475</sup> "Our Company was probably the first to develop the better appearance of a filling station in this country," claimed Nichols in a 1924 meeting in Washington, D.C. "I think we were the first to encourage the planting of shrubs, flowers and grass, the elimination of signs and loud clashing colors."<sup>476</sup> This statement was a stretch, as oil companies had begun to consider aesthetics when designing gas stations around 1915, and had tended to reach for architectures that bespoke a sense of affluence that resonated in particular with class-climbing middle- and upper-middle-classes who owned cars.<sup>477</sup>



Figure 26: The Ward Parkway Garage in 1928.  
*J. C. Nichols Company Scrapbooks, SHSMO-KC*

Nichols, however, carried this idea a step further by insisting on gas station designs that meshed with the larger architectural program. His belief that "the filling station can be made unobjectionable, if proper control of design, color and maintenance is retained" was clear in the eight

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<sup>474</sup> See historical photograph in William S. Worley, *The Plaza, First and Always* (Lenexa, KS: Addax Publishing Group, 1997), 42. The capacities of these structures reflects those listed on Sanborn Maps, Vol. 4, Sheet 573, Vol. 6, Sheet 797, MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>475</sup> J. C. Nichols, "Country Club Plaza," SHSMO-KC.

<sup>476</sup> Nichols, "Suburban Sub-Divisions With Community Features."

<sup>477</sup> John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *The Gas Station in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 163.

freestanding stations that stood at various Plaza corners by 1930.<sup>478</sup> (Figure 27) The White Eagle on Mill Creek Parkway, with its hipped, red-tile roof, landscaping, and manicured grass, was not only lovely, with its porte-cochère coming across as more graceful than functional; it also melded easily with its surroundings of shops and apartments.<sup>479</sup> So too did the Sinclair station on the opposite side of the Mill Creek Building. It featured a gabled roofline, two rounded arches, and commanding finials on its two front corners—features that were as elegant as the globe-shaped lights that lit the circular drive and echoed the circular shape of the heads of the gas pumps.<sup>480</sup> The Plaza’s other stations—bearing names of the major gasoline companies of the day—peppered the theme on corners across the Plaza. Phillips 66 at Broadway and Forty-Seventh, Skelly at Broadway and Alameda Road, White Rose at Forty-Seventh and Wyandotte, Standard Oil on Forty-Seventh between Madison and Summit, and Standard Oil at Wornall and Ward Parkway all gave motorists a sense that they were fueling their cars in elegant rather than grubby surroundings.<sup>481</sup>



Figure 27: The Phillips filling station at Forty-Seventh and Broadway.  
*J. C. Nichols Company Scrapbooks, SHSMO-KC*

The boxy forms of garages and gas stations were relatively easy structures to incorporate into the Plaza’s total design, but parking lots were a bigger challenge—and one confronted by what were doubtless the most expensive American “parking stations” to date.<sup>482</sup> Located in two open spaces along Ward Parkway, the Plaza’s two initial parking stations were a \$30,000 investment that turned

<sup>478</sup> See Sanborn Maps, Kansas City, Missouri, Vol. 4, Sheet 573, Vol. 6, Sheet 796, 797, MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>479</sup> Nichols, “Suburban Sub-divisions with Community Features.”

<sup>480</sup> See historical photograph in Worley, *The Plaza, First and Always*, 19.

<sup>481</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 255; JCN, Vol. 4, 158-159, Vol. 6, 229-232.

<sup>482</sup> Worley, *The Plaza, First and Always*, 52.



parking a car into an aesthetic experience.<sup>483</sup> Sketched with stucco walls capped with a row of red bricks, the paved lots were accessed on foot via entrances adorned with iron gates bolted to columns topped with finials.<sup>484</sup> These walls and the berms on which they stood were devised to conceal the appearance of rows of cars inside, and decorations along the perimeter helped further disguise the lots' mundane purpose. Decorative benches—some of them Carrara marble antiques from Italy—were positioned at regular intervals and interspersed with pruned shrubbery. At one corner, the wall notched inward to create a small courtyard adorned with benches, greenery, and a small tiered fountain. Rows of bishop's crook lampposts lit the lots during the evening.

After 1928, the majority of the lots' five hundred spaces would have been taken on any given night by patrons of the 2,500-seat Plaza Theater, the focal point of a mixed-use building constructed in the core of the Plaza district.<sup>485</sup> The newly emerged medium of film had enriched the realm of urban entertainment, and filmgoing had become particularly popular for the city's middle and upper-middle classes. And like many movie houses of the day, the Plaza Theater clothed the emerging technology of film in a traditional style in a way that took the Jazz Age trend of packaging the new in the clothing of the old to a new level.<sup>486</sup>

The building's design, by Edward Tanner, featured a slender, ornate tower capped with a small, azure-hued dome. Ornate lanterns on the exterior were exact replicas of Spanish originals Nichols had purchased in Spain, and a tall, elaborate band of S-curve filigree and finials along the roofline marked the building as more whimsical than its predecessors.<sup>487</sup> Uplit at night, complete with an ornate marquis, the Theater's main facade quickly became the focal point for cars turning into the Plaza area. Tanner also traced the projecting roofline of the auditorium and catwalk, respectively, with a red-tile overhang and the gusty terra cotta filigree and finials—effectively adding more vertical flair to the Plaza scene. (Figure 28)

Inside, the theater was an Andalusian wonderland. “A bit of Cadiz is here, a fragment of Seville there, and rich remnants from Granada yonder,” commented *The Independent* upon the theater's opening. An ornate lobby, “opulent but more restrained in adornment than is usually observed in the average picture palace of this country,” recalled a Spanish *palacio* and served as stylistic preparation for the theater interior. Inside the cinema itself, moviegoers beheld a screen traced with ornate terra-cotta panels and topped with a heraldic shield. Three-century-old, hand-wrought iron grills graced the windows of the stage loft, and tapestries and banners, stone dentil work on the walls, an embroidered curtain, Moorish lanterns, and a coffered and stenciled ceiling made it no wonder that a local paper commented more on the power of the cinema's interior than what was on screen: “for once in the apparently colorful history of this palatial abode of moving pictures, the screen offering was anything but the whole show.”<sup>488</sup> Lavishly appointed theaters were nothing out of the ordinary during the Hollywood-obsessed times of the '20s, but the extent of the Plaza Theater's design and its synchrony with the other buildings outside made for a whimsical moviegoing experience that was second to none.

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<sup>483</sup> Nichols' claimed that \$26,000 was spent on aesthetic treatments alone. See “The Development of Outlying Shopping Centers.”

<sup>484</sup> J. C. Nichols, “Country Club Plaza,” SHSMO-KC. Historical photographs of the parking lots are available in JCN.

<sup>485</sup> “Plaza Theater is Started,” *Kansas City Star*, clipping in JCN, Vol. 9, 196; Nichols, “The Development of Outlying Shopping Centers”; K0528, Box 001, Native Sons of Kansas City Photographic Collection, SHSMO-KC.

<sup>486</sup> Warren Susman, *Culture as History*, 108.

<sup>487</sup> J. C. Nichols, “Country Club Plaza”; see also JCN, Vol. 9, 193-194, 267-272. Nichols had travelled to Spain in 1928 to purchase interior items for the theater. JCN, Vol. 7, 182.

<sup>488</sup> “Plaza,” *The Independent*, (October 13, 1929), 23; see also JCN, Book 9, 267-272.



Figure 28: The Plaza Theater Building in 1930.  
*J. C. Nichols Company Scrapbooks, SHSMO-KC*

The scale and extent of the Plaza’s Spanish architecture and aesthetics made for a nearly overwhelming experience for some. As a newcomer to Kansas City wrote in the mid-1930s, the Plaza “is more Spanish than either Madrid or Barcelona and almost approaches the delightful charm of Seville or some of the other southern cities where the true architecture of Spain is to be found.”<sup>489</sup> That reaction owed much to the full-throttle embrace of the sorts of quintessential Spanish features that were characteristic of Andalusian architecture. Yet it also relied on the sheer scale of the architectural cohesion. In no other urban landscape had such a bold and flamboyant theme been carried through so many different types of spaces, both inside and out. At the Plaza, it seemed, no experience—seeing a movie, buying a hat, visiting a doctor, picking up a car, or filling up the gas tank—was complete without surroundings that were rendered according to the theme of a tastefully rendered, Old World exoticism.

Lewis Mumford sneered at what he saw as “the barren wilderness of classicism and eclecticism” that characterized American architecture between 1890 and 1930, but as an art historian notes, the use of traditional styles during the Jazz Age did more than establish a much-desired historical rootedness in a world that was changing at a breathless pace. It also gave the impression of a persistence that would last into the future.<sup>490</sup> This use of historicist styles was apparent everywhere in one-off buildings, small shopping developments, and countless suburban homes. Yet Kansas City’s Plaza expressed a new scale, visibility, and thoroughness of historicist aesthetics and architecture in a commercial development. And while some critics were correct that the Plaza was the epitome of architectural pastiche, they often ignored the reality that it was *good* pastiche. The proportionality of dimensions, the balanced and restrained use of ornamentation, the coherence of color, and “the sense

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<sup>489</sup> Gerald Muir, letter to the editor, *Future* 1, no. 4 (February 1, 1935): 4.

<sup>490</sup> Mumford quoted in Quoted in Deborah Frances Pokinski, *The Development of the American Modern Style*, 73; Loeb, *Entrepreneurial Vernacular*, 208.

of old-fashioned materials in an age of mechanical reproduction”—those features were integral elements that perhaps explain why these buildings remained relatively immune to much of the scathing criticism that was directed at less tastefully rendered buildings during Kansas City’s 1920s building boom.<sup>491</sup>

That is not to say that the Plaza was an fully coherent landscape. As an incrementally built district, it endured ragged edges, and its empty spaces were often awkward to look at, especially given that they were a stone’s throw from some of the city’s most meticulously designed buildings. And not all of the buildings meshed from the ensemble. The headquarters of the Postal Life and Casualty Insurance Company, for instance, added an austere (and doubtless unwelcome) dose of stripped classicism into the Plaza’s historicist mix, and was as out of place as the bare, open lots on the western side of the Plaza that sat empty through the lean years in the early 1930s.<sup>492</sup> But those infelicities were hardly enough to dent the fact that by 1930, motorists or streetcar patrons could descend the stretch of Mill Creek Parkway or Main Street towards the Country Club District to find, on their right, an architecturally coherent district of no fewer than seven shop buildings, two high-volume parking garages, eight filling stations, a major theater, and most prominently, a new way of shopping, dining, and engaging with the urban scene.

Within eight years of breaking ground, the Nichols Company could rightfully boast that Kansas City’s Plaza offered an unprecedented environment stocked with an unmatched array of goods and services outside of an American downtown. With a U.S. Post Office, locations of both the Postal Telegraph Company and Western Union, American Express, and the Plaza Bank of Commerce, the Plaza was a place for practical business. Some forty physicians and dentists saw patients in the Plaza’s upstairs office spaces, and eight and twelve thousand people per month, respectively, paid their bills at the offices of the Kansas City Gas Company and the Kansas City Power and Light Company. Three taxicab and livery car services had Plaza locations, as did Air Express pick-up service.<sup>493</sup> The Plaza also boasted locations of every major grocery store in Kansas City (including a self-service Piggly Wiggly in addition to Wolferman’s), a hardware store, a delicatessen, a dry cleaners, the city’s largest florist, eight restaurants, two cafeterias, a “high-class dining room” opened by the former manager of the Mission Hills Country Club, ten beauty parlors, two dry goods stores, three drug stores, a 500-seat entertainment hall, and numerous specialty shops that offered essentials, luxuries, and everything in between—from “exclusive” outlets to “popular prices shops where clothes and dresses are offered to suit every pocketbook.”<sup>494</sup>

And the Plaza was not merely a district for second branches or high-end stores with a narrow clientele. By 1930, many Kansas City firms as well as regional divisions of national companies called the Plaza home. Hoover Vacuums, U. S. Gypsum, Black & Veatch (a Kansas City based engineering company), Schulze Baking, the Postal Life & Casualty Insurance Company, Fred Wolferman’s Food

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<sup>491</sup> As the *Country Club District Bulletin* emphasized, “In this day of machine-made materials, it is interesting to note that the highly colored polychrome tile, so unsparingly used, is all hand scored. Architect and builders have felt the results attained through the use of this material amply justify the additional time required.” See “Country Club Plaza,” *Country Club District Bulletin* 5, no. 3 (March 1923): 3. The Bulletin also emphasized the use of imported European art objects. See “Country Club Plaza Notes,” *Country Club District Bulletin* 5, no. 8 (December 1923): 8; JCN, Vol. 7, 59-60; For criticism of historicist features of buildings, see “Architecture: Ornamentation, Colonnades, etc.,” Mounted Clippings File (1900-1949), MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>492</sup> Worley, *The Plaza, First and Always*, 53. Not all of the buildings, after all, were under Nichols’ control. Selling off plots for other entities to build meant relinquishing artistic control.

<sup>493</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 249-252; “Plaza Conveniences,” Mounted Clipping, JCN, Vol. 6.

<sup>494</sup> See “Plaza Conveniences,” Clipping, JCN, Vol. 6; JCN, Vol. 6, 269-278; Vol. 7, 53-57, 212-213.

Stores, Phillips Petroleum, Skelly Oil, Mid-Continent Petroleum, Huff's Secretarial School, and the Aiken's Dancing Academy all had their primary or regional headquarters in Nichols' new district.<sup>495</sup>

That so many outlets represented either headquarters or flagship stores underscored the reality that Plaza was no mere neighborhood center, but rather a metropolitan node—an unprecedented concentration of decentralized commerce that would point the way to the suburban trends of the post-World War II era. The Plaza might have had aesthetic ties to its namesake development, including the fact that its architectural program and mix of stores was devised in many ways for the people living to its south. Yet it was also clear that this new “business center” was just that. Nichols, after all, continually referred to the Plaza as an ideal take on the “outlying shopping center” rather than a “neighborhood center,” and positioned it as a shopping area that would be both appealing and accessible to shoppers from across Kansas City as well as to out-of-towners. Aside from prolific advertising throughout Kansas City, the Nichols Company worked hard to stimulate the automobile traffic passing near the Plaza. “Every effort should be made to develop the proper arterial approach from all directions,” Nichols said.<sup>496</sup> He even successfully pushed for the designation of a major road leading into the Plaza from Kansas as U.S. Highway 50—a move that meant that anyone driving through or into Kansas City from the hinterland (and in particular a nearby “well-to-do rural section”) would be led directly to the Plaza, which would serve as a *de facto* gateway to Kansas City.<sup>497</sup>

It was no surprise, then, that the Plaza began to grace the city's postcard turnstiles and promotional brochures by the end of the '20s, sharing the stage with structures like Union Station, the Liberty Memorial, and (after 1937) City Hall and the Municipal Auditorium. While “Nichols' folly,” as detractors had termed the Plaza in its nascent stages, could have been a botched project, or simply another aloof suburban retail block of limited options, the Plaza was becoming a major node of the metropolis. As the American Bar Association accurately explained in advance of its 1937 meeting in Kansas City, “this outlying shopping area constitutes a complete and beautiful miniature city in itself.”<sup>498</sup>

Like all landscapes that enjoyed the economic vitality of the 1920s, the Plaza felt the impact of the Depression. Building ceased, plans were pared down, rents were lowered, and plans were put in place to recruit more people to the area. Yet thanks to the health of the gas stations and the success of boosting tenancies in the surrounding apartments, the Nichols Company avoided bankruptcy, resuming construction in 1937. That year, Edward Tanner's Plaza Medical Building added a whimsical new structure to the development, kicking off a spate of building that lasted into the 1940s. And while the Depression had put a temporary damper on the Plaza's expansion, it also ensured that no other city had a place like Kansas City's Sevillian shopping center. After all, by the time its success was evident, developers in other suburbs and cities did not have sufficient capital to replicate it in full.<sup>499</sup>

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<sup>495</sup> See “Plaza Conveniences,” Clipping, JCN, Vol. 6.

<sup>496</sup> Nichols, “The Development of Outlying Shopping Centers.”

<sup>497</sup> Nichols, “Country Club Plaza”; “Millions in New Shops,” *Kansas City Star* (April 30, 1922), 12D; See also Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 259, 262; JCN, Vol. 6, 109.

<sup>498</sup> “Kansas City: Host for the Approaching Sixtieth Annual Meeting of the American Bar Association,” *American Bar Association Journal* 23, no. 7 (July 1937): 498.

<sup>499</sup> J. John Palen, *The Suburbs* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1995), 192. The Plaza was, by the end of the 1920s, reproduced on a much smaller scale in a handful of upscale residential areas, namely in Highland Park in Dallas, River Oaks in Houston, Malaga Cove Plaza in Palos Verdes Estates (Los Angeles), and Shaker Heights near Cleveland. Yet in these developments, the shopping did not have the same regional pull or identity as the Plaza did in Kansas City. See Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 245. He cites Don Riddle, “Homes to Last for All Time: The Story of Houston's River Oaks,” *National Real Estate Journal* (March 4, 1929): 21, 24; and “Model Business Center,” *National Real Estate Journal* (December 22, 1930): 35–6.

Kansas City's Plaza thus remained an anomaly of the American metropolis, especially as post-World War II developments took peripheral shopping design in new directions.<sup>500</sup>

In a 1930s speech on the Plaza, Nichols wasted no time in outlining the revolutionary features of his commercial landscape. Yet he also framed Kansas City's new business district much like he did his residential developments: not as an isolated world, but as an integral and unique piece of a metropolitan whole that he championed as the next great American city. The full development of the Plaza, Nichols admitted, would take years, yet even in its first twenty the ultimate goal was evident. Not some cloistered domain solely for residents of a tiny enclave, the Plaza was a vibrant area fitting for "one of the finest cities in the world; a city of wonderful men and women. A city with a great downtown business district; a city of wide and varied industries; a city located at the crossroads of America; the air center of the United States. The greatest railroad center; a concentration point of transcontinental highways." As "a great prosperous district unparalleled in any country in the entire world," the Plaza might have been peripheral in terms of its suburban location. Yet in its style, its substance, its visibility, and its success, it had become as central to Kansas City's identity as any other part of the urban landscape.<sup>501</sup>

### ***High-Rise Living in the Centrifugal City***

If the sprawling elegance and Old World commercialism of the Country Club District signaled a new echelon of suburban life, the most striking element of the Plaza's environs was a far more urbane form: the high-rise apartment building. The 1920s are widely known among architectural historians as "the apartment decade," and for good reason: a spate of high-rise construction late in the decade stocked park frontages in cities across America with commanding lineups of grand and elegant buildings. Yet in Kansas City, the majority of these buildings would have a front-row seat for the development of the country's most revolutionary commercial district.

As early as 1922, no less than four builders have begun constructing tall, multi-unit structures on the thoroughfares leading into and tracing the Plaza area, and by 1930, some thirty-five structures stood in commanding clusters around the core of low-rise shops. With their comparatively soaring heights and architectural poise, these buildings were the dominant component of the city's pathbreaking commercial environment. Yet these multi-unit structures also reflected a far more surprising reality: that in a scrupulously controlled district largely under the control of one person, there could still be a striking degree of variety, not only in the range of talents represented by different builders and architects, but also by the range of living options they offered prospective tenants of the new suburban world.

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<sup>500</sup> A profile of eight early shopping centers "standing the test of time" in a May 1999 edition of *Shopping Center World*, a major trade journal, lists the Plaza as the first of such centers. The introductory essay notes the variety of centers represented, but the truth remains that the Plaza is the outlier of the eight. (The others included Lakewood Center in Lakewood, California (1951), Old Orchard Center in Skokie, Illinois (1956), Southdale Center in Edina, Minnesota (1956), Garden State Plaza in Paramus, New Jersey (1957), Lenox Square in Atlanta, Georgia (1959), Wonderland Mall in Livonia, Michigan (1959), and Turfland Mall in Lexington, Kentucky (1967).) It is the only one built before the Depression and War, and the only with a vaguely urban street aesthetic. The other centers named are all products of the 1950s and -60s, and all examples of enclosed or exclusively pedestrian malls. Not until the rise of outdoor lifestyle centers in the 1990s did suburban (and urban) shopping begin to look like the Plaza. See Matt Valley (ed.), "Standing the Test of Time," *Shopping Center World* 28, no. 5 (May 1999): 211–227.

<sup>501</sup> J. C. Nichols, "Country Club Plaza," (c. 1934), SHSMO-KC.

The Plaza's apartment buildings constituted the most prominent developments in a citywide boom in multi-unit development that began after World War I.<sup>502</sup> Low-rise apartment buildings had been a key component of Kansas City's built landscape since the turn of the century, but a postwar housing shortage, plentiful capital, developments in elevator technology and structural engineering, and new fireproofing regulations catalyzed a transformation in the building form.<sup>503</sup> In 1927, Kansas City's developers even banded together to form the Apartment and Homebuilders Association, "seeking in concert to devise more efficient ... apartments and to hit on satisfactory construction economies" that would successfully win the support of banks, bond houses, and insurance companies—the main underwriters of large construction projects.<sup>504</sup> The net result was epitomized by streets like Armour Boulevard, where builders began tearing down Gilded Age homes in the late 1910s and early '20s to construct commanding buildings in urbane, historicist styles, often with modernistic flourishes. While structures like the traditional Georgian Court (1917) and Bellerive (1921) offered conservative elegance, edifices like the Sullivanesque Newbern (1921) and Art Deco-inflected Clyde Manor (1930) added cavalier dashes of glamour to the once domestic thoroughfare.<sup>505</sup>

The apartment hotel buildings that builders began constructing around the perimeter of the Plaza, however, differed from those in the city's older areas. When Nichols realized that the immediate population density of the Plaza was insufficient to guarantee financial success for the shops, he opted to sell the peripheral plots of land to developers who possessed the necessary capital and specialized knowledge to design and construct large residential buildings.<sup>506</sup> Large-scale apartment buildings were typically associated with life in the central city rather than the urban periphery, but such structures were becoming a common feature of suburban landscapes, where families, working women, young professionals, and the elderly were turning apartment life into a mainstream, middle-class dwelling practice.<sup>507</sup>

Ever savvy about the tastes of the white, middle-to-upper-middle classes, Nichols likely wagered that there were growing numbers who wanted to take part in the exclusivity and comfort of

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<sup>502</sup> See City Housing Report (Kansas City, Missouri: City Plan Commission, 1940), housed in MVSC, KCPL.

<sup>503</sup> For examples of Kansas City's turn-of-the-century apartments, see "New York Apartment Building, Kansas City, Mo.," *Inland Architect and News Record* 45 (April 1905): 32; "El Detora Apartment Building, Kansas City, Mo.," *Inland Architect and News Record* 45 (June 1905): 56; and "Wiltshire Apartments, Kansas City, Mo.," *Western Architect* 15 (May 1910): 56.

On fireproofing ordinances, see "Apartment Houses," Mounted Clippings File, Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library; George Ehrlich, *Kansas City, Missouri: An Architectural History, 1826–1990* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 66–67. The introduction of automatic-control elevators opened up a new frontier for modestly priced buildings. See Roderick Duncan McKenzie, *The Metropolitan Community* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1933), 223; Richard Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City: Dwelling Type and Social Change in the American Metropolis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 123.

<sup>504</sup> "Apartment & Home Builders' Association," *Kansas City Star*, May 26, 192, Mounted Clippings File, Missouri Valley Special Collections, Kansas City Public Library.

<sup>505</sup> "The Bellerive, Kansas City, Mo., An Apartment House Hotel," *American Architect [and] the Architectural Review* 126, no. 5 (November 1924): 443.

<sup>506</sup> Robert Pearson and Brad Pearson, *The J. C. Nichols Chronicle: The Authorized Story of the Man, His Company, and His Legacy, 1880–1994* (Kansas City, MO: Country Club Plaza Press, 1994), 104; Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 223, 245; Worley, *The Plaza, First and Always*, 32.

<sup>507</sup> Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920's* (New York: Harper & Row, 1931), 83–84; Douglass, *The Suburban Trend*, 72; Matthew Gordon Lasner, *High Life: Condo Living in the Suburban Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 57; "The Outlying Apartment Hotel as a New Development in Urban Housing," *National Real Estate Journal* 40, no. 2 (February 1928): 32–36. Kansas City's first zoning ordinance had even designated the Plaza's boulevard frontages for large-scale apartments in 1923—a development that made Nichols' plan for demographic engineering all the more feasible. See Zoning Map: Kansas City, Missouri, Kansas City: City Planning Commission, 1923, Missouri Valley Special Collections Digital Archives, Kansas City Public Library.

suburban life, but who could not or did not want to buy homes. After all, while the culture of status, self-presentation, and self-image was reaching a fever pitch during the 1920s, the rising cost of home construction and financially difficult terms of mortgages kept homes out of reach for many.<sup>508</sup> Still others were simply uninterested in the stipulations of home ownership and maintenance. In any case, living in multiunit housing that was aesthetically and spatially tied to Kansas City's prime residential landscape was one way to claim at least partial membership in the new suburban experience (along with its full range of social and cultural implications) without the prospect of committing financial suicide. (Although, as we will see below, the rents on the new apartments were expensive for their time.)<sup>509</sup>

Builders began constructing apartment buildings almost as soon as the Plaza itself was announced, and by 1924, prospective tenants could glimpse the variety in a handful of buildings on the Plaza's northeast side. The building that displayed the purest sense of accord with Delk's Spanish buildings—even preserving their sense of restraint—was the six-story Park Lane, located a block north of the Mill Creek Building. Architect Gregory Vigeant's design implemented a Mission Style parapet over the entrance, carefully placed oriel windows and wrought iron balconies, as well as a tower feature on one of the projecting bays to ensure that the Spanish flavor was decisive, yet reserved.

The line of connection to the Plaza went beyond architectural flair. A sense of spatial accord was apparent as soon as one stepped out of the Park Lane's lobby onto the broad front terrace, whose sense of openness against the expanse of Mill Creek Parkway gave the feeling that the building was not bluntly cut off from the street as in many downtown buildings, but open to it. Cars approaching the Park Lane could sense this aesthetic of free movement too; the building's front court hugged a circle drive where motorists could pull up directly to the front terrace. Circle drives were common to many apartment buildings, but the Park Lane's fed into an automobile infrastructure unlike downtown's crowded grid. Feeding in and out of the broad stretch of Mill Creek Parkway, the drive seemed less a cloistered unloading zone than an extension of an open thoroughfare where a sense of free movement prevailed. The Park Lane had no designated garage for tenants, but there was no need. The immense Plaza Garage—in the obligatory Spanish style—was only a block away.

If residents walked out the front door of the Park Lane and veered right, they would step into a landscape that catered towards a new set of spatial aesthetics and conveniences. Passing the White Eagle Gas Station, with its red-tile roof, landscaping, and manicured grass, they would move into a retail world graced with long awnings, wide walkways, sidewalk plantings, and uniform rooflines. In contrast to downtown, this was an environment defined by openness, coherence, calm, and ample sunlight and airflow—commonly touted elements of suburban respite. Even the Park Lane's moderately priced studios and one-bedrooms seemed to highlight the abundance of light and air, with the original architectural plans designating the majority of double-exposure corner rooms as solariums.

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<sup>508</sup> Renting was still a popular and necessary form of housing tenure, even in new suburbs of the 1920s. See Lasner, *High Life*, 58-59; Wright, *Building the Dream*, 199. For the culture of image during the '20s, see Kathleen Drowne and Patrick Huber, *The 1920s* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 55-61.

<sup>509</sup> Many wanted to shield their children from the vice and diversity of city, see Wright, *Building the Dream*, 210. On Nichols and racial restrictions, see Fogelson, *Bourgeois Nightmares*, 66-67; Kevin Fox Gotham, *Race, Real Estate, and Uneven Development: The Kansas City Experience, 1900-2000* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 38-45; Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 129-130, 147-150; Schirmer, *A City Divided*, 97-107. This heightened degree of racialization reflected one of the more pernicious dimensions of the new suburban paradox that was so clearly on display in Kansas City: even as the new suburbs demonstrated a diversification of its built environment and the needs it accommodated, it also reinforced boundaries for other groups more rigidly than ever.

“The place to live,” the Park Lane offered rooms that were “ideally located” in close proximity to the shops, theatre, and respite of the Plaza, “away from the confusion of downtown.” And this suburban environment was as much a social phenomenon as a physical one. In addition to “delightful surroundings,” residents were promised an abundance of engaging activities, particularly those that appealed to upper-middle-class women. In the pages of the *The Independent*, the publication by and for Kansas City’s elites, the Park Lane advertised frequent bridge games, luncheon gatherings, and dinner parties in its acclaimed dining room. The hotel also claimed to be the locus where the “inner circle”—many of whom were residents of the Country Club District—chose to take meals.<sup>510</sup>

Across the broad sweep of Mill Creek Park, residents and guests of the Park Lane would glimpse the Ponce de Leon, another Spanish-styled edifice with a deeper footprint and a narrower façade than the Park Lane. Despite more conservative dimensions of interior space, the building’s turreted apex boasted a whimsical feature that made up for its comparative lack of ground-level grandeur: an expansive rooftop bungalow, complete with a broad terrace overlooking the verdant surroundings.<sup>511</sup> Rooftop terraces had become a key feature of apartment hotels in many places, and particularly in the urban core, where they created sense of aloof calm high above the street. Yet here was one attached to a full-sized home, already in the suburbs, that gave its lucky residents a sense of domestic quietude and spaciousness above an uncommonly calm landscape.

By the end of the decade, the stretch of Forty-Seventh Street running east from the Plaza was lined with both walk-up structures that gave way to a series of taller buildings at the Oak Street intersection. The prominent building of this group was the Sophian Plaza, a structure that offered a more aloof brand of elegance. Its “Pure Italian design” embraced a Beaux Arts sensibility in style and ornament, but thwarted its axial impulses in its orientation towards the graceful curve of Warwick Boulevard and Southmoreland Park. Boasting forty units of grand proportions and services characteristic of the finest apartment hotels in the city, the Sophian Plaza was proudly advertised as being unhinged from any transit links to the urban core and made to “measure up to its environment out there on the edge of the Rockhill district,” an area whose pastoral elegance was traced by grand estates and native rock fences.<sup>512</sup> (A hidden, two-story parking garage of 6,600 square feet catered toward suburban motorists.) The ground-floor layout by local firm Shepard and Wiser bore the hallmarks of suburban interiors; a graceful front courtyard led to an opulent lobby, which in turn opened up onto an immense back colonnade—a lineup that emphasized a sense of openness and an optimization of airflow and sunlight.

In contrast to the aloof position of the Sophian Plaza, a collection of six buildings lined up on the south bank of Brush Creek along Ward Parkway gave the Plaza a grand flourish of conspicuous urbanity. The result of increased levels of speculative building and free-flowing capital of the late ‘20s, these Italianate towers by developers Guy McCanles and George Miller would transform the immediate environment of the Plaza. This bankside property, offering a commanding view of the Plaza’s development, was arguably Nichols choice land for multi-unit housing, and McCanles bought the entire expanse with plans to construct a series of nine- and ten-story towers with a total capacity to house 550 families.<sup>513</sup> (Figure 29)

Construction began with in December 1927 with the Villa Serena, whose Renaissance revival plan by architect Alonzo Gentry established a precedent for the subsequent buildings.<sup>514</sup> Its modified

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<sup>510</sup> See issues of *The Independent* from 1929 and 1930.

<sup>511</sup> E. Jaquelin, “A Hearth in the Skies,” *Kansas City Star*, September 25, 1927, 5D.

<sup>512</sup> “New Sophian Apartment,” *Kansas City Star*, April 9, 1922, 2B; Wilson, *The City Beautiful Movement in Kansas City*, 19.

<sup>513</sup> JCN, Vol. 10, 68.

<sup>514</sup> JCN, Vol. 10, 67.



U-shaped footprint offered a symmetrical façade, with tapestry brick, terra-cotta accents, and two hipped, red-tiled roofs further articulating the Italianate style. Subsequent construction was swift. The neighboring Locarno echoed the Italian style but amplified its dimensions and sense of architectural articulation. An unbroken façade featured a heavily decorated ground level and roofline, and two towers gave the building a greater sense of poise, matched on the interior by far grander apartment dimensions than the Villa Serena. With these two buildings, it became clear that the McCanles buildings would boast amenities characteristic of grand palace hotels. Spacious dining rooms, rooftop terraces with expansive views, and sumptuously decorated lobbies all exuded a sense of luxury and exclusivity. McCanles did not supply dedicated parking facilities for his tenants, but street parking and the Plaza Garage gave apartment residents ample space. “Deluxe units” of four-, five-, and seven rooms were typical in these large buildings, with rents ranging from \$135 to \$220 per month.<sup>515</sup>



Figure 29: The McCanles Apartment Hotels from the roof of the Plaza Theater Building.  
*J. C. Nichols Company Scrapbooks, SHSMO-KC*

Aggressive advertising for this imposing lineup gave equal billing to the urbane décor, modern amenities, and suburban location. In the spring and summer of 1929, ads in the *The Independent* and *Kansas City Star* pitched the Villa Serena, Casa Loma, and Locarno as ideal apartment quarters for those of discriminating taste interested in a prime location with an atmosphere of refinement. Verbiage gushed about building and its modern features—all-electric appliances, double- and triple-exposure units, and so forth—with several offering photographs of the spacious and sumptuous lobby interiors. Coffered wood ceilings, cumbersome revivalist furniture, chandeliers, and carving and ornament along walls and doorways bespoke Old World style. At the same time, unfurnished units offered benefits of personalization, giving “free scope to individual tastes” in the interest of “creating a real home.”<sup>516</sup> One ad for the Casa Loma underlined the suburban aesthetic, albeit in a clichéd phrasing: “all the city

<sup>515</sup> “A Distinguished New Apartment Hotel,” *Kansas City Star*, August 25, 1929, 3D. In 2016, these values would equal \$1,896 and \$3,090.

<sup>516</sup> “A Distinguished New Apartment Hotel,” *Kansas City Star*, August 25, 1929, 3D.

comforts...plus country air.” Tradition and modernity meshed between these walls, the ads seemed to say, all in a new metropolitan context.

The 96-unit Riviera was billed by the *Kansas City Star* as the “Aristocrat of Kansas City’s New Apartment Buildings,” and according to one advertisement, was an “exclusive home for discriminating people,” with four-, five-, and seven-room units offering “every latest, modern convenience including electrical refrigeration, electric stoves, forced ventilation, [and] complete hotel service.”<sup>517</sup> And while the building might have been the largest and most advanced in the city, location was its chief amenity. “Situated on beautiful wooded Loma Linda hillside overlooking Brush Creek Parkway and the picturesque Country Club Plaza,” the Riviera promised a location proximal to Kansas City’s landscape of privilege. Brochures offered inset maps and photographs of the suburban parks, boulevards, and formally decorated gathering areas in nearby neighborhoods. As with the Park Lane and Sophian Plaza, the main selling point for these buildings was the proximity to a non-apartment landscape of suburban isolation.<sup>518</sup>

With an orientation that emphasized bulk and architectural thrust, these six buildings stood much like elegant structures of New York’s Central Park West or Chicago’s Lake Shore Drive, creating an atmosphere of urbane poise in a new suburban order. They exhibited the so-called “ensemble” effect epitomized by the buildings of New York architect Emery Roth—structures that, according to one historian, “have a style, an aura to them,” confirming the idea that “a city is made well when the whole is greater than the parts.”<sup>519</sup> And if these broad-shouldered buildings formed a cohesive whole, so too were they individually distinctive and striking. Churrigueresque decoration topped the Casa Loma Towers. The Riviera boasted a roofline marked with elegant broken pediments adorned with scrolls. And on the Locarno, elegant bands of stone and terra cotta give the base of the building as much distinction as the graceful twin towers did the roofline, which recalled New York’s elegant Beresford on Central Park West.

Most important, residents of the newest lineup of Plaza apartments would experience a sort of walking city and environment that meshed with their residences, whether they were buying groceries, perusing new hats, or catching the newest film out of Hollywood. Stepping out of elegant lobbies to cross the verdant banks of Brush Creek into the open space of the Plaza was to move through a uniformly aestheticized landscape where the experience of commercial interaction bore the same marks of tradition and innovation that the new apartment buildings did.

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On the west side of the Plaza, a set of ten smaller buildings constructed by developer Charles Phillips set a new standard for high-quality yet affordable efficiency apartments. (Figure 30) In his ambitious project “to house a thousand families” in a four-block area, Phillips forged an artistic partnership with female architect Nelle Peters, who saw to it that Phillips’ compact buildings—all named after his favorite poets and writers—catered to the needs of residents who might have had more limited income and needs, but nonetheless were interested in stylish buildings and modern dwelling spaces in a suburban locale. With their compact efficiency units, these buildings were clearly intended for either singles, newlyweds, the elderly, or small families whose finances would allow them to rent high-style spaces of compact footprints in this growing area of Kansas City.

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<sup>517</sup> “A Tremendous Success,” *Kansas City Star*, December 29, 1929, 9D.

<sup>518</sup> JCN, Vol. 10, 88-89.

<sup>519</sup> Paul Goldberger, quoted in Donald Miller, *Supreme City: How Jazz Age Manhattan Gave Birth to Modern America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 174.

After dabbling with a handful of structures that were adaptations of the city’s ubiquitous two- and three-story walk-up apartments, Peters and Phillips opted for more vertical profiles that incorporated features of the new “garden apartment” formats, which placed maintained courtyards within a larger mass of buildings.<sup>520</sup> Seven buildings each of seven stories, and two of eight, offered a variety of efficiency units ranging from compact studios to larger one- and even two-bedroom units. Even in the larger buildings, Peters managed to maintain a sense of domestic quietude that was in harmony with the neighboring areas of single-family homes. Her twin, five-story Cezanne and Rousseau towers, for instance, framed an interior courtyard that gave residents a sense of peaceful intimacy. Across Forty-Eighth Street, she replayed the spatial arrangement in more formal architectural terms with the classically ornamented Henry Longfellow and Robert Louis Stevenson buildings. On all of these buildings Peters included an amenity that would become a trademark feature in her designs: open-air sleeping porches that were integrated into the facades. Kansas City’s sweltering summer nights made outdoor sleeping quarters were a highly desirable element of any dwelling, and Peters’ incorporation of them into her efficiency apartments (in addition to the usual technique of encouraging cross-breezes through window placement) without compromising the formality of the exteriors revealed a skillful negotiation of comfort and elegance.<sup>521</sup>



Figure 30: The efficiency apartment buildings of the Poets’ Quarter at the Plaza’s west end.

*J. C. Nichols Company Scrapbooks, SHSMO-KC*

Peters also saw to it that these comparatively small buildings had big doses of style. Exclusive dining facilities, parking garages, and seating areas were lacking, but lobby interiors boasted marble floors and walls, wrought iron bannisters, and polished brass fixtures. While some structures she designed in conventional historical eclecticism, others displayed a more playful sense of style. On the Mark Twain and Eugene Field, Art Deco inflections—angular finials, spandrel panels with geometric lotus figures, and a decorative tower with an ornamental copper dome on the former building—

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<sup>520</sup> The Tudor revival David Copperfield building, for instance, featured a quietly playful exterior characterized by parquet brick patterns and irregular quoins of native, uncut stone. For the rise of garden format buildings, see Plunz, *A History of Housing in New York City*, 122-124.

<sup>521</sup> George Ehrlich and Sherry Piland, “The Architectural Career of Nelle Peters,” *Missouri Historical Review* 83, no. 4 (January 1989): 172.

elevated the facades into the domain of the urbane. The Rousseau and Cezanne were flecked with engaging parquet brickwork and chromatic geometrics in the spandrel panels and along the roofline. The Thomas Carlyle and James Russell Lowell—the grandest of the buildings—featured Jacobethan and classical elements flecked with neo-Moorish style.

Various publications advertised Phillips' buildings as "exclusive" and "modern," but the ads were far tamer than those for the Plaza's other buildings. These advertisements also named singles as prospective tenants in addition to families, reflecting the broadening market of Plaza accommodations.<sup>522</sup> And while it was likely that many of the single workers living in these buildings did not own their own automobiles, their proximity to the Westport streetcar line allowed for sustained connectivity to the central city.<sup>523</sup> The compact units in most of these buildings ranged from studios to larger four-room units, with monthly rents ranging from \$75 (\$1,053) per month to \$125 (\$1,756 in 2016) per month—decidedly less expensive than in the grander buildings along Brush Creek (although still only in range for upper-middle class renters).<sup>524</sup> These structures also faced the upscale homes of the Sunset Hill development across the verdant expanse of Ward Parkway, a position that gave them a more direct sense of connection with the elite residential area, despite housing a different class of people under a different housing tenure.

If Phillips' buildings gave those with minimal spatial needs or stricter financial constraints the opportunity to gaze over the Plaza, the other end of the spectrum was satisfied by the Walnuts, a three-tower cooperative complex tucked into a parklike setting just up the hill from the McCandles lineup. According to the earliest promotional brochures, the Walnuts' fifty-four units would be "in their entirety much superior to any apartment precedent established in Kansas City, hence not comparable to local standards."<sup>525</sup> Indeed, for those who could afford the luxury, these units offered a comprehensive package of opulent amenities that could satisfy the most discerning residents of the city.

Most Plaza apartments invoked their proximity to the seclusion of the suburban world, but the Walnuts embodied that seclusion. "Home-seekers will find The Walnuts offers the quiet atmosphere of a private residence with the additional advantages afforded in exclusive hotels," read an elaborate brochure.<sup>526</sup> Indeed, where the Park Lane, Sophian Plaza, and Brush Creek apartments offered park-fronted views, the Walnuts were nested in an undulating and verdant sweep of several acres leading to low-slung native stone fences. (Figure 31) Gracious apartments offered the space and options of personalization available in private estates. With a maximum of two units per floor, owners could opt to combine units both horizontally and vertically, effectively recreating the manor-like estates from which many of them were moving. "Duplex apartments, with 2-story living rooms in English treatment with heavy oak beams and rafters"—some with as many as sixteen rooms—would be offered alongside "compact" apartments consisting of a living room, dining room, breakfast room, kitchen, book room, powder room, two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and a maid's room.<sup>527</sup>

Builder C. O. Jones also indicated that his buildings offered more than a dressed-up version of the other Plaza buildings. His was no "public hotel or apartment precedent," but a "development ... cast along the lines of a cultural residence, to reflect an atmosphere of privacy and quiet elegance." As

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<sup>522</sup> "Another Structure for the Literary Apartment Group Takes Its Name from Robert Browning," *Kansas City Star*, September 1, 1929, D1

<sup>523</sup> See Gallup's Map of Greater Kansas City (1912), Kansas City: Berry Map Company, Missouri Valley Special Collections Digital Archives, Kansas City Public Library.

<sup>524</sup> "Apartment Homes of Distinction," *Kansas City Star*, March 3, 1929, 5D.

<sup>525</sup> The Walnuts. Promotional Booklet. Vertical File, Landmark Commission, City of Kansas City, Missouri.

<sup>526</sup> The Walnuts, Brochure, Vol. 10, 9. Hubert Perry Wright Papers (KC0013), SHSMO-KC.

<sup>527</sup> "Plans Elaborate Edifice." *Kansas City Star*, February 5, 1928, 1D.

a cooperative, residents would exact private, if collective, control over interiors. A designated “committee on furnishings,” comprised of several future inhabitants—three women and two men—ensured that a “domestic touch” was apparent in the shared spaces. Viewing their new building as an assemblage of homes rather than as a multi-unit building, they sought to employ “a restraint that might not be expected in a hotel or club.”<sup>528</sup> The appeal of these towers might seem to be their suburban setting, but promotional material implies that these towers were in fact built to accommodate a lifestyle that found the less concentrated, open-lot home experience more trouble than it was worth. “The use of country clubs for entertaining and outdoor recreation; more frequent and extended absence through increased travel; servant problems with kindred household responsibilities; and ever more mounting maintenance costs” were some of the listed deterrents to open-lot estate life.<sup>529</sup>



Figure 31: The three towers of the Walnuts, Kansas City’s elite cooperative development.  
*J. C. Nichols Company Scrapbooks, SHSMO-KC*

Just as The Walnuts emphasized privacy over proximity, they also offered a visage of almost overwhelming traditionalism. Elements of style and status upstaged modern features. In line with pursuing a greater air of exclusivity, The Walnuts broke with the architectural program of the Mediterranean Plaza and instead bore a fully articulated Jacobean style that was, as the brochure suggested, in harmony with the wooded setting. Boillot and Lauck's design harnessed variegated brick, Bedford stone trim, and rough slate to produce a highly textured look conveying a sense of high craftsmanship and lived-in elegance. At the same time, details reinforced a sense of individuality rather than grand coherence. The three towers—each featuring an angled building footprint—sat in a rough row, with irregular exterior styling. Turrets protruded at certain points, and windows were not rigidly organized. Unlike the urbane row of structures along Brush Creek, these towers would appear as a rambling castle rising from a suburban park.

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<sup>528</sup> “Walnuts’ 350-Foot Corridor Will Be the Longest Here,” *Kansas City Star*, March 23, 1930, 1D.

<sup>529</sup> The Walnuts. Promotional Booklet. Vertical File, Landmark Commission, City of Kansas City, Missouri.

In March 1928, before construction had even begun, the *Kansas City Star* announced that Theodore Gary, owner of telephone manufacturing plants in Chicago and England, had paid \$73,600 to reserve a unit on the tenth floor—a transaction that set a new record west of Chicago for the size and scale of the luxury suite. With this announcement, it was clear that multi-unit space in the proximity of the Plaza had become not only the territory of middle-to-upper-middle class renters, but the richest members of the elite as well.

By the time the onset of the Great Depression put a stop to private building, the Plaza boasted room for at least a thousand families and individuals in its varied multi-unit offerings, which dominated the “Apartments of Distinction” page introduced in March 1929 in the Sunday real estate section of the *Kansas City Star*. Around the same time, the J. C. Nichols Company, with its sights still set on using apartment development as a financial buttress, opened an apartment leasing office in the Plaza shops to help prospective tenants locate appropriate housing in the area.<sup>530</sup>

And while these structures were built largely on speculation, Nichols, Phillips, McCanles, and Jones had been right in assuming that a substantial cohort of prospective renters (and buyers in the case of The Walnuts) were interested in multi-unit suburban living. Photographs and city directories indicate that these buildings boasted healthy tenancies, and the area quickly became a residential and commercial hub for the southern portion of the city—a status that, along with prudent business practices, helped the area navigate the economic turbulence the Depression.<sup>531</sup>

The buildings also allowed an expanding tenancy to experience—perhaps more than any suburban locale had ever done—a strange yet unprecedented sense of environmental cohesion. Whether clustered on the west side of the Plaza, lined up along Brush Creek, or marooned in a wooded glade, these buildings managed to seem unified despite clear differences in style. After all, theirs was a curious sort of unity—one based not on stylistic imitation, but rather on a common design ethos and use of materials. Jacobean, Art Deco, Spanish, and Italianate flourishes pulled these buildings in different directions, but their earth-toned brick, cream-hued terra cotta, red tiles, and a common proportion of aesthetic filigree pulled them back together again. A pleasant sense of unity triumphed, in other words, despite differences in building scale.

A quasi-coordinated collection of apartment buildings might have struck some as an unusual landscape component in such close proximity to a low-density, residential landscape, but the development was in line with one of the key features of suburban development of the 1920s: the use of architectural and spatial diversification to buttress the longevity of the new landscape, even if it entailed a controlled densification of residency. And just as the residents of the new buildings both embraced the blend of urban efficiency and suburban setting, so too did many residents of the area likely welcome this sophisticated component of the city in their midst.

These buildings, after all, were not so different from the Country Club District’s homes. They blended the old and new in ways that maximized comfort and convenience.<sup>532</sup> They boasted the latest in spatial organization and utilities, but wore an array of interior décor and exterior designs that resonated with the sensibilities of a public fixated on wealth and “good taste.” Whatever the scale and opulence of their chosen building, the tenants of the Country Club District’s new apartments—who were indeed a new class of suburban renters—were experiencing the new thrill of having a urban lifestyle in a suburban setting. As they gazed out of their lofty windows over the toytown Seville below, they took in more than a newly exotic commercial and spatial experiment. Living in urbane luxury in

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<sup>530</sup> “Apartment Homes of Distinction,” *Kansas City Star*, March 3, 1929, 5D.

<sup>531</sup> Worley, *J. C. Nichols*, 255-256.

<sup>532</sup> JCN, Vol. 6, 239; Rose, *Cities of Light and Heat*, 133-134.

a commercial district removed from the city, they were witnessing the rise of a new metropolitan reality that was in sharper relief in Kansas City than anywhere else.

### *Dragons of Eden*

With its elegant neighborhoods, striking apartment buildings, and tasteful shopping center, the Country Club District was reliably characterized as the antithesis of Kansas City's older areas, and especially its working class districts. Yet the differences went beyond architecture and aesthetics. As a haven for many Republican businessmen and their families, the South Side also came to be perceived as a bastion of anti-machine sentiment—"a pain in the hefty neck of Der Fuehrer of Missouri politics," as one weekly put it.<sup>533</sup> It was for good reason that in *Mr. Bridge*, Evan Connell's fictionalized memoir of a Country Club District upbringing, the titular character is an upstanding lawyer with a distaste for politicians like the Irish-American Horton Bailey, a caricature of a Pendergast crony with a "false heartiness," "harsh, loud laughter," and a tendency to evade debt repayments.<sup>534</sup>

Election returns reliably proved that the South Side was Pendergast's biggest challenge, and reform-minded pamphlets and weeklies invoked the political slant of its neighborhoods as evidence for the desire for change. In April 1924, for instance, *Future* trumpeted that that the Eighth Ward, which contained the Country Club Plaza and its hundreds of apartment hotel residents, "committed political treason" against the machine by rejecting two of its proposed city council candidates in favor of the "Citizen's ticket"; nearly ten thousand of the sixteen thousand voters chose the reform candidates.<sup>535</sup> *Future* also regularly profiled residents of the district in its "May We Present" column to highlight the differences between upstanding citizens and the machine operatives the other columns constantly lambasted. Nichols himself was the subject of a front-page article in June 1935 that extolled the developer as a paragon of civic responsibility, despite his membership and cooperation with the Democratic organization. "But whatever Mr. Nichols' politics," the journalist admitted, "...if all the machine Democrats had the stuff this man has, we wouldn't have to stay in business."<sup>536</sup>

Nichols might have shared Pendergast's political affiliation, but many saw the tension between the machine and the South Side in their polar opposite dispositions. Nichols, energetic but erudite in appearance, seemed an upstanding counterpoint to the burly and aggressive Pendergast. A commonly recounted story about a face-to-face interaction between the two men highlights the gulf between them. When the two met in person to handle the payment for the Ward Parkway lot for Pendergast's 5,500-square-foot mansion, the boss produced \$5,000 in cash from his wallet. Struck by the illicit and risky vibe of handling such sums of hard cash, Nichols instructed that his real estate deals usually involved money orders. The boss allegedly complied.<sup>537</sup>

Yet no Kansas Citian could overlook the fact that Pendergast lived in the most affluent stretch of Nichols' master landscape, and that fact suggested a deeper reality: that the cleavage of the city into a corrupt core and respectable suburbia was a matter of appearance more than substance. If Nichols and Pendergast kept a respectful distance from one another in public, and thus seemed to view themselves as equals, there were suggestions that in reality their dealings were more extensive—and

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<sup>533</sup> "'Assured' Majorities," *Future* 1, no. 22 (June 7, 1935): 1. See also Coleman, *The Kansas City Establishment*, 60.

<sup>534</sup> Evan S. Connell, *Mr. Bridge* (1969; repr., Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), 23-26, 108-109.

<sup>535</sup> "'Assured' Majorities," 1.

<sup>536</sup> "He Didn't Stop with his Vision," *Future* 1, no. 24: 8. It goes without saying that Nichols likely maintained official ties with the Democratic organization to increase his chances of success given the amount of municipal cooperation he needed to realize his plans.

<sup>537</sup> Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 79; Pearson and Pearson, *The J. C. Nichols Chronicle*, 141-142.

unequal—than most assumed. Nichols doubtless had contact with the boss on a semi-regular basis, as cooperation with the machine was essential for financial and bureaucratic survival in Kansas City. As the wife of one city leader remembered, Nichols' wife acknowledged her husband's cooperation with Pendergast while developing the Country Club District: "From time to time he has had to call on the city for help, especially in this big new development. The city for years has been Pendergast. Pendergast *is* the city."<sup>538</sup> That sense of acknowledged collaboration and subordination was clear in the Kansas City vignette of Thomas Hart Benton's 1936 mural in the state capitol building in Jefferson City: Benton, a social realist if there ever was one, placed Pendergast in an elevated position vis-à-vis Nichols, who, sitting at a table fiddling with his wine glass, looks simultaneously complacent and aloof.

Plenty of the rich Republicans who dominated the political reputation of Kansas City's South Side minced few words about their distaste for Kansas City's corrupt government. But if their (often hypocritical) disdain of sleazy nightlife and violence seemed apropos given their distance from hub of the city's vice, the machine's concrete-hungry projects were a hot-button encroachment that Country Club District residents saw in their own backyards. Major sewer and repaving projects along Brush Creek and in Brookside had repeatedly disrupted the peace and quiet of Nichols' neighborhoods, and although the smoke, dust, and noise were reason alone to complain, most did so because they knew that many of these projects were unnecessary and served only to line the pockets of Pendergast and his contractor associates.<sup>539</sup>

The situation finally became too much for one resident, Dr. Logan Clendenning, an erudite physician with an enthusiasm for Shakespeare and a distaste for politics. After McElroy green-lighted a major sewer project near Mission Hills despite homeowner protests and proper Council authorization, Clendenning took to extreme measures after four months of listening to the cacophony of drilling outside his home at Fifty-Sixth Street and State Line Road. After failed appeals to McElroy, the construction company, and even an in-person protest at Pendergast's home, an intoxicated Clendenning confronted the origin of the noise itself. Lumbering towards the deafening air compressor outside his home dressed in a suit and Homburg hat and armed with an ax, he silenced it in full view of the WPA workers with a few swift strokes. Booked for intoxication, destroying federal property, and disturbing the peace, Clendenning was released on bond as one of the only residents of the South Side to have resorted to physical aggression to confront the political juggernaut that he and many of his neighbors doubtless felt.<sup>540</sup>

If there was any personal feud that symbolized the tensions between the urban core and the South Side, it was between McElroy and Nichols, who engaged in a brutal face-off at the end of the '30s. To spite the animosity of the privileged Country Club District against the city's construction projects, McElroy proposed a massive concrete viaduct that would have loomed over the Country Club Plaza (even though he himself was a resident of the district). The measure failed, but its purpose of insulting Nichols was duly noted.<sup>541</sup>

Despite the apparent tensions between the city's two primary landscapes and their leading men, it did not take a sociologist to realize that there was cross-pollination going on between the two domains, and that the pious and the profane in a "city of contrasts" were not mutually exclusive. Certainly some high-minded residents kept their distance from the boss in all matters of society and politics, but it is likely that many detractors who placated Pendergast in person and slandered him

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<sup>538</sup> Marjorie Beach, *The Mayor's Wife: Crusade in Kansas City* (New York: Vantage, 1953), 25; cited in Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 46.

<sup>539</sup> Reddig, *Tom's Town*, 358.

<sup>540</sup> Reddig, *Tom's Town*, 358-359.

<sup>541</sup> *Ibid.*, 358.



behind his back in fact had a relationship with the machine and its landscape that was replete with hypocrisy. As Harry S. Truman inquired of “upstanding” Kansas Citians in the early ‘30s: “Who is to blame for present conditions but sniveling church members who weep on Sunday, play with whores on Monday, drink on Tuesday, sell out to the Boss on Wednesday, repent about Friday and start over on Sunday?” He concluded, “I think maybe the Boss is nearer heaven than the snivelers.”<sup>542</sup>

There might have been plenty of snivelers living in the new homes of the Country Club District, but as Kansas City’s crime surged by the early 1930s, the energies that had long simmered in the core boiled over into the city’s landscape of privilege. In a city whose criminal architecture was drawn to create a safe haven for criminals, many desperadoes by nature were drawn to hide out where law-abiding authorities would least expect to find them. Not long after the majority of the “family friendly” apartment hotels around the Plaza were finished in the late 1920s, the *Kansas City Times* reported that the area had become a “haven for crooks” who represented the city’s “abundance of out of town members of the underworld.” Swindlers, highway robbers, and even murderers wanted for crimes committed in places as far away as St. Louis, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles were regularly seen “in the company of Kansas City police characters.” Leon Felix and J. G. Davies, two nationally known con men, James Morris, a “notorious prowler and forger,” and Max Bernstein, a “one-armed crook who plays the confidence game extensively,” were just a few of the characters who were making even admitted Kansas City hustlers leery of keeping valuables in their pockets.<sup>543</sup>

The trend continued and intensified into the early ‘30s. “From their musty hideaways in the North Side,” a local paper admitted in 1933, “the furtive-eyed gentry have turned to the spreading elms, the well-trimmed lawns, the cool verandas and comfortable surroundings of the Country Club District.” That summer, twelve desperadoes—including wanted murderers, machine gunners, bandits, and racketeers—were apprehended in six separate apartments of three prestigious Plaza apartment hotels, each with wads of cash to help them sustain luxurious lifestyles that included frequent outings to nearby golf courses.<sup>544</sup> Fugitives like Frank Nash, the criminal whose handover instigated the Union Station Massacre, lived in the Longfellow apartments in the Poets Quarter in the early 1930s, around the time when notorious bank robber Harvey Bailey moved into the Whitehall apartments on Brush Creek Boulevard just east of the Plaza.<sup>545</sup>

Some criminals were even hiding out in the neighborhoods further south. In early July 1933, law enforcement officials extracted James Simmons, a Capone crony and fugitive from Chicago, from a “salmon-hued, stucco house” near Fifty-Sixth Terrace and Main Streets owned by a seemingly respectable couple. As it turned out, the Malloys were not as upstanding as their quiet demeanor suggested; “Fritz” Malloy was a known bootlegger and a Leavenworth alumnus, and was doubtless protecting a kindred spirit by offering Simmons sanctuary.<sup>546</sup> Nor was this an isolated case. Frank Miller, a fugitive and former South Dakota sheriff who had turned against the law rented a home at Sixty-Sixth and Edgevale in nearby Armour Hills around the same time.<sup>547</sup>

This cohabitation of typical residents and desperadoes put the everyday South Side suburbanite in regular, if unknowing, contact with some of the nation’s most notorious criminals. That contact was most regular on the golf course, where many criminals, flush with cash, chose to spend

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<sup>542</sup> “Pickwick Papers,” Harry S. Truman Papers, Papers as Presiding Judge of the Jackson County (Missouri) Court, Box 3, Harry S. Truman Library; quoted in Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 97, 99.

<sup>543</sup> “A Haven for Crooks,” *Kansas City Times* (June 27, 1929), 1A.

<sup>544</sup> Walter G. Heren, “Gangsters Desert North Side to Rub Elbows with Best Citizens,” *Kansas City Journal-Post* (July 8, 1933), 2.

<sup>545</sup> Hayde, *The Mafia and the Machine*, 41.

<sup>546</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

their time while hiding out. In July 1933, a local paper reported that Eugene C. Reppert, the Director of Police, had unknowingly played eighteen holes with Verne Miller, the machine gunner who had pulled the trigger on the morning of June 17 in front of Union Station. Miller, using the alias of a “Mr. White,” had been a proficient, “affable,” and “gentlemanly” golfer who had filled in a vacant spot for the four-man game. Yet in the wake of the realization, those who had encountered the young criminal remembered some strange and telling tendencies: glimpses of a gun in an armpit holster, an unjustifiable paranoia at times, and a habit of sitting in the club cafe with his back to the wall.<sup>548</sup>

Such habits doubtless grew out of the knowledge of the fact that while the South Side was a safe haven of sorts, it did not offer full sanctuary. The previous year, Reppert had photographed Harvey Bailey, a fugitive wanted for a Fort Scott, Kansas, bank robbery, while he was playing a round of golf at the Old Mission Country Club. The evidence led to a partly successful apprehension; on July 7, 1932, three federal agents and the chief of detectives for the Kansas City Police Department rushed onto the course to capture not only Bailey, but also Nash and two other Leavenworth escapees. In the end, three were apprehended, with Nash running off across the fairway to evade capture.<sup>549</sup>

Nash’s eventual apprehension in Hot Springs, Arkansas, and return to Kansas City for a handoff to federal authorities would, of course, draw Miller into his role as the Union Station shooter—a role he was allegedly informed of by his wife during a round of golf. Those who could connect the dots would also realize that two crucial links in the chain of events leading up to the city’s bloodiest moment—the escape of Nash, the soliciting of Miller—played out not in the clandestine quarters of the North End, but on the fairways of the South Side golf courses.

Even more high-profile events tarnished the sylvan life of the South Side. More than a few dirty deals were undertaken at 5650 Ward Parkway.<sup>550</sup> So too did the street and its surroundings play host to a number of high-profile kidnappings during the ‘30s. On May 27, 1933, two thugs posing as deliverymen weaseled their way into the home of city manager Henry McElroy near Fifty-Seventh and Main to kidnap his twenty-five-year-old daughter Mary for a \$30,000 ransom. For thirty-six hours, the young woman was chained to the wall of a basement in nearby Shawnee, Kansas, where she was otherwise courteously treated by her captors. Once they had received their ransom, they released her in front of the Milburn Golf Club just a few miles west of Mission Hills. One of the captors, Walter McGee, would become the first kidnapper in the United States to receive the death penalty for kidnapping—an outcome Mary considered deeply unjust. In one of the most striking cases of Stockholm syndrome on record, she would commit suicide in 1940, implying in a note that the harsh punishment of her captors had, as one historian puts it, “upset the balance of her life.”<sup>551</sup>

Events like these also revealed how flawed the city’s management of crime was. In the case of McElroy’s daughter, the captors had not been through Lazia’s unofficial system of gatekeeping for crooks, giving him an unusually dim perspective on the situation. That the victim was the daughter of the city’s Pendergast crony city manager made the situation even stickier. McElroy, knowing the city’s inner workings, contacted Lazia rather than the police for assistance.<sup>552</sup> But Lazia, disarmed of the usual outlets of intimidation, investigation, and negotiation, had to raise the ransom money from fellow gamblers and racketeers.<sup>553</sup> And if this situation did not make clear the uncontrollable nature of the city’s criminal activities, that fact was vexed to nightmare less than a month later in the parking lot

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<sup>548</sup> “Blissfully Ignorant, Reppert Plays Golf with Plaza Machine Gunner,” *Kansas City Journal-Post* (July 7, 1933), 1-2.

<sup>549</sup> Hayde, *The Mafia and the Machine*, 41-42.

<sup>550</sup> Reddig, *Tom’s Town*, 277.

<sup>551</sup> Hayde, *The Mafia and the Machine*, 54-56

<sup>552</sup> Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 281.

<sup>553</sup> Hayde, *The Mafia and the Machine*, 54-55.

of Union Station, when the botched disruption (organized by Lazia himself) of the handoff of a captured Nash left several federal agents and criminals dead. Kansas City's "organized" crime system, in other words, was spinning out of control, and few Kansas Citians believed, justifiably so, that the mounting chaos was confined to the urban core.

J. C. Nichols could pride himself on the fact that his new neighborhoods delivered on the unfulfilled promises of the City Beautiful movement. And in addition to its stabilization of property values and sustenance of elegant neighborhoods, he could count a quiet political goal among the successes. In 1917, George Kessler suggested in a national publication that the original plan for the Parks and Boulevard system in Kansas City had an enticing ulterior motive: aside from its economic and social goals, the plan aimed to unify the city's upland districts as a collective force that could push back against the growing power of the Democratic machine, then concentrated under the power of Jim Pendergast in the city's lowland river wards.<sup>554</sup>

That the system failed to do so and Nichols' domain became known as the "obstreperous South Side" could have given the developer another reason to boast.<sup>555</sup> But as Nichols knew better than anyone, optics were not reality, and as he drove by the boss's Ward Parkway mansion and intercepted rumors about shady dealings, kidnappings, and residents rubbing shoulders with desperadoes strolling down the Plaza's sidewalks and lounging in the nearby clubhouses, he surely realized that he should have been more careful what he had wished for. Having wished for his grand landscape to become synonymous with Kansas City, Nichols understood that it had in more ways than one.

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<sup>554</sup> Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 58; George Kessler, "The Kansas City Park System and Its Effect on the City Plan," *Good Roads* (June 2, 1917): 324. Kessler wrote that "In sharp contrast to the feeling of sectionalism and consequent antagonism of one section to another within a city existing in some communities, the boulevards and parkways ... have accomplished the real purpose outlined ... namely, the tying together of all sections and the uniting of Kansas City as a whole into a community whose purposes and actions are for the benefit of the city as a whole at all times." In reality, this purpose was not accomplished, at least by the original system. Kessler, after all, might have simply been trying to inflate the perceived successes of a system he considered his masterpiece; having moved to St. Louis in 1910, he had long felt that Kansas City denied him the credit he deserved.

<sup>555</sup> "'Assured' Majorities," 1.

### III. ART & ARTIFICE

*“[B]elieve with me that out of the prairie people, with their bursting vitality, their abundance of original sin and their mysticism, there will come some day, here in this city they have builded, as great art as the world has ever known; in music, in letters, and at last in paint and bronze and marble.”*  
—Shaemas O’Sheel, *The New Republic*, May 1928

“The generations just behind us conquered a wilderness of prairie and of plain,” declared J. C. Nichols on December 11, 1933. “Now, art comes.”<sup>556</sup> Nichols’ proclamation marked the opening of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, capping off a landmark year for the development of the city’s cultural and intellectual life. Earlier in 1933, the Kansas City Philharmonic had given its first concert as a permanent ensemble, and in October the private University of Kansas City had held its first classes.<sup>557</sup> Yet the art museum was the grandest and most well-received of these additions—the cultural analogue of the city’s new skyscrapers, factories, and suburban neighborhoods. Built adjacent to the Rockhill subdivision just blocks east of the Country Club Plaza, the 390-foot-wide building contained no fewer than fifty exhibition rooms, a grand atrium framed by twelve thirty-foot columns, a Roman style courtyard, and an auditorium.<sup>558</sup> A landscape design plan of unprecedented ambition for a museum shaped the surrounding greensward. The museum even had an adjacent educational component; in the late 1920s, the Kansas City Art Institute (KCAI)—a downtown fixture since the 1880s—established a new campus across from the Nelson-Atkins site to round out the city’s emerging arts district. As a building intended to house “a collection reflecting the best handiwork of civilized man in all known ages,” “the Nelson” and its proximal art school were thought to symbolize not only the city’s ascendance into the upper ranks of the urban hierarchy, but also its resilience during the nadir of economic depression.<sup>559</sup>

Nichols was right to suggest that the development of creative industries was a sign of the city’s maturation, yet his implication that the most impressive addition to Kansas City’s landscape in the early ‘30s was the inevitable outcome of a mounting legacy of cultural and economic sophistication was as misleading as the museum’s façade was portentous. In terms of scale and monumentality, the Nelson-Atkins might have looked similar to Gilded Age institutions like New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art (1874), the Art Institute of Chicago (1893), or the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (1908), yet in its execution and development it was clear that there was a profound gap between the ideals that imbued the museum’s founding and the geographic, economic, and cultural realities faced by the trustees who saw through the plans to construct the building and stock its galleries.

Envisioned as a great urban art museum, the Nelson-Atkins was, in execution, a fixture both spatially and developmentally oriented towards the suburban South Side. Located in walking distance of the Country Club Plaza, the museum was developed largely under the guidance of J. C. Nichols, whose role as one of the museum’s three trustees made plain that the new addition to the cityscape might have looked like a grand urban building, but was in many ways a touchstone for the new

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<sup>556</sup> Nichols, “Opening of the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art.”

<sup>557</sup> Coleman, *The Kansas City Establishment*, 55.

<sup>558</sup> Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 74.

<sup>559</sup> The Nelson-Atkins was technically opened as two separate institutions—the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art and the Mary Atkins Museum of Fine Arts—housed in a single building. While the official merger of the two in both name and administration did not occur until 1983, it suffices to treat them as the same institution in this discussion. Locals today, almost without exception, refer to the museum simply as “the Nelson,” just as many did during the first years of its existence.

suburban reality. In that reality, art was traded like a consumer commodity, patronage was another version of a suburban garden club, and to visit the museum was to behold art not for its inherent value, but for its reinforcement of the symbolic ties between suburban affluence and classical beauty.

The Nelson-Atkins was not the only entity that revealed truths about the city's growing cultural domain. In 1935, the arrival of Regionalist painter and Missouri-native Thomas Hart Benton—then among the most publicized artists in America—to head the painting department at the proximal KCAI promised to elevate the city's artistic profile. Yet Benton, perhaps more acutely than any other figure, personified the cultural contradictions that had made Kansas City a place where the wholesale acceptance of art was never assured. As familiar with Ozark life as New York culture, the prodigiously talented Benton was a crass and difficult figure whose populist views on art challenged conventional norms of patronage as much as his parochial prejudices offended museum officials who were attempting to grow a preeminent cultural district. While the trustees could not have picked a worse figure to further their artistic agenda, they also could not have picked a more fitting personality to represent their city's conflicted cultural ideals. In his paintings, comments, methods, and political assertions, Benton encapsulated the longstanding collision between “houn’ dawg and art” that a local journalist had noted was the key to understanding Kansas City's development.<sup>560</sup>

The overwrought suburban museum, the clumsy development and stocking of its galleries, and the contentious relationship between the eager KCAI and one of America's preeminent painters—these elements might have suggested that art in Kansas City was a perennially tortured domain. Yet the most striking characteristic of Kansas City's creative life was that this fine art world faced off against a genuinely powerful crucible of artistic innovation in the urban core. Several miles north of the Nelson-Atkins, in the nightclubs, ballrooms, and social clubs of the city's growing and increasingly circumscribed black community, the development of one of the nation's most active cultures of jazz made for one of the most glaring polarizations in any urban landscape in America.

The music emanating from the venues in and around the vicinities of Eighteenth and Vine and Twelfth and the Paseo was not simply ubiquitous: it was also singular in sound. Characterized by a driving swing beat, thick instrumentation, and a call-and-response form that catalyzed infamous, all-night jam sessions, Kansas City jazz was a sonic amalgam of the varied musical traditions that black musicians had brought into the city on their quest for jobs. Jazz, of course, was not considered by most to be art in the '20s and '30s, much less good art. As a product of black creativity that served to increase the allure of the city's vice districts, it even stood in direct geographic and symbolic contrast to the privileged domain of visual art on the South Side—a reality that increased the chasm between the city's two hemispheres. That distinction, however, underscores the reality that jazz was as singular an artistic product as Kansas City would ever yield. Produced out of raw social conditions—the forces of migration, a racialized power struggle over space, and the nefarious structure of crime and illicit entertainment that kept much of downtown Kansas City in business—the city's jazz represented art in the real sense: “a way” rather than “a thing,” it was “an art without an agenda” that ensured that Interwar Kansas City was defined by a distinctive sound as much as anything else.<sup>561</sup>

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<sup>560</sup> Haskell, “Houn’ Dawg vs. Art,” *passim*.

<sup>561</sup> Elbert Hubbard, *Little Journeys to the Homes of the Great Teachers* (New York: William H. Wise and Co., 1916), 219; Tim Kreider, “My Own Private Baltimore,” *New York Times* (July 4, 2015).

## *The Asynchronies of Fine Art*

The nearly eight thousand visitors who made their way through the galleries of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art on its opening day in December 1933 beheld a structure whose grandeur and monumentality was unprecedented in Kansas City. The architecture and site plan for the new museum expressed the desire to create a temple of severe yet gracious power. Situated on the northern end of a rectangular, five-acre site, the museum was designed by local firm Wight and Wight in the guise of Gilded Age structures like the Cleveland Museum of Art, but with a timely dash of neoclassical severity. The museum's 390-foot-wide main (south) facade took shape as a severe horizontal mass—unadorned by a traditional pediment—that was distinguished by a shallow, central portico marked off in Ionic order by six unfluted columns rising above a flight of forty-five steps. Understated yet elegant filigree marked the entire length of the building; a short cornice, wide dentils, short acroterions, and a flossing of elegant, low-relief carving gave the building an appearance that was engaging up close but austere from far away. The landscape design—pared down from original plans due to cost—enhanced the building's severity; a virtually unbroken, three-acre sweep of green lined by rows of trees led towards the massive edifice.<sup>562</sup> (Figure 32)

A series of twenty-three relief panels by sculptor Charles Keck on each facade offset the austerity with a vivid chronicle of humankind's advancement.<sup>563</sup> The building's south, east, and west panels recast the myths of settlement and westward expansion in the visual forms of mythical antiquity, and included the "Arrival of Hernando de Soto," "Pioneer Mothers," "Native Americans Observing the Arrival of the Railroad," and "Fortitude Protecting Settlers from Attack." For the main doors, the bronze forms of the Gates of Paradise were blended with scenes from "The Song of Hiawatha," a schoolroom standard about western conquest and expansion.<sup>564</sup> Numerous texts inscribed onto the building reinforced the grandiose mythology and sense of majesty. Friezes on each facade bore inscriptions by Wilde, Arnold, Gautier, Schiller, Plotinus, Goethe, Michelangelo, and Hugo. Patrons approaching the main entrance could behold Hugo's words as a motto of sorts for what lay inside: "It is by the real that we exist; it is by the ideal that we live. The soul has greater need of the ideal than of the real."

In a way it made sense that the ponderous museum bespoke a sense of grandeur and monumentality in the Gilded Age tradition. After all, its namesake benefactor, William Rockhill Nelson, was an archetypal Progressive Era plutocrat who viewed European art as a great civilizer of America's young urban society, and in particular the unpolished masses of Kansas City.<sup>565</sup> On a Grand Tour of Europe in 1896—a trip that cemented his plans to bring fine art to his adopted hometown—he purchased nineteen copies of Old Master paintings (including a Velázquez, da Vinci, Raphael, and Botticelli) and subsequently loaned them to the Kansas City Art Association for display in the public library. In tune with Gilded Age tradition, he believed that the public would benefit from seeing quality reproductions of canonical works rather than second-rate originals. He also reflected the era's

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<sup>562</sup> Erbes, 137; Michael Churchman and Scott Erbes, *High Ideals and Aspirations: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 1933-1993* (Kansas City, MO: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 1993), 20.

<sup>563</sup> See Erbes, 128. See also *General Specifications: William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art and Atkins Museum of Fine Arts*, June 1930, Building Superintendent's Records, 1946-1954, Archives of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (hereafter NAMA).

<sup>564</sup> Erbes, 128-131. See also Appendix 2.

<sup>565</sup> As its name indicates, the Nelson-Atkins was also the result of a smaller bequest made by a reclusive widow named Mary Atkins, who died in 1911 and left a \$700,000 portion of her million-dollar estate for the purpose of buying property and building a public art museum. The trustees of the two estates, recognizing their common goals, combined financial forces to build a structure that would house both institutions. Nelson's estate, however, was by far the dominant one in both symbolic and monetary terms.

perspective of social hygiene and well-meaning but naive patronization, insisting the gallery be open on Sundays so that the working classes could view and take in the glory of the art.<sup>566</sup>



Figure 32: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in its first decade.  
*MVSC, KCPL*

When Nelson died in 1915, his will made clear that his goal of using art to civilize the masses would persist. Naming his wife and daughter the trustees of his \$12 million fortune, he specified that, upon their deaths, the presidents of the Universities of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma—enlightened individuals removed from Kansas City politics as he saw it—would appoint three resident Kansas Citians as “university trustees” to manage the transubstantiation of his fortune into a fine arts institution; the trustees were to sell off Nelson’s two newspapers (the *Kansas City Star* and *Kansas City Times*) as well as his properties to form a trust whose income would be used to procure “works or reproductions ... of fine arts which will contribute to the delectation and enjoyment of the public generally.”<sup>567</sup> As the New York-based *American Art News* asserted, the Nelson fortune would “unquestionably ... be one of the country’s greatest art endowments and will make Kansas City an art center of great importance.”<sup>568</sup>

Yet Kansas City’s rise as an “art center” would be colored much differently than the cities whose museums stood in close physical and civic relation to the urban core. Nelson’s death in 1915, after all, did not simply set into motion the building of an art museum in Kansas City. It also saw the construction of a major civic asset in the spatial and social context of the upper-middle class suburbs—an outcome that reflected the profound shifts in the city’s social and geographic development. Just as the centrifugal impulse seemed to catalyze the decentralization of commerce, high-end residency, and social life, so too did it carry the impulse of institutional art into the sylvan domain—a place where its presence would be understood in ways vastly different from those that Nelson had likely envisioned.

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<sup>566</sup> Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 25-26; “The Nelson Art Museum,” *American Art News* 13, no. 30 (May 1, 1915): 1.

<sup>567</sup> Quoted in Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 28. See also Howard E. Huselton, “Kansas City’s Art Museum Plan,” *The American Magazine of Art* 20, no. 9 (September 1929): 498-502.

<sup>568</sup> “Nelson Millions for Kansas City Gallery,” *American Art News* 20, no. 2 (October 22, 1921): 1.

For starters, the selection of the trustees paved the way for a leadership that advocated the city's suburbanization. After the death of Nelson's daughter in 1926, the appointed university presidents chose three prominent figures—suburban developer J. C. Nichols, commercial developer H. V. Jones, and philanthropist and businessman William Volker—to guide the museum's development.<sup>569</sup> These men were all, of course, successful individuals with a genuine interest in furthering the cultural development of Kansas City. Yet Volker was the only one of the three who was cut from the same Progressive Era mold as Nelson, and his resignation in 1929 led the university trustees to replace him with former Missouri governor Arthur Hyde, who had also been recently appointed to be the Secretary of Agriculture under Herbert Hoover. The result was a leadership structure in which the major decisions would be in the hands of the two younger trustees—both real estate men who understood well the role of centrifugal development in the city's rise as a major industrial and cultural center.

It was no surprise, then, that they approved the idea pitched by Nelson's son-in-law to build the Nelson-Atkins not in the urban core, but on the grounds of Oak Hall, Nelson's five-acre estate that sat mere blocks from the Country Club Plaza. The property had fallen into Irwin Kirkwood's hands due to the premature death of his wife, and the sole living survivor of the Nelson fortune insisted that his late widow wanted her father's cultural temple built on the grounds of his beloved home. (Nelson had also instructed that Oak Hall be liquidated and demolished after his daughter's death.) Nelson had made no specifications for a physical building to house his collection, and had even been part of the conversation to construct a City Beautiful civic center opposite Union Station—a plan that evolved into a vision for a grand promenade of buildings lining the approach to the Liberty Memorial. Yet the death and departure of several vocal proponents, the waning of City Beautiful ideologies, and a lack of public funding dedicated to such a purpose—all combined with the success of the South Side—led Nelson's daughter, son-in-law, and the trustees to see the city's suburban domain as a viable and even preferable option.

That Nichols was chairman of the trustees was certainly a dominant factor in the decision. The city's savviest real estate man was, by all accounts, the dominant figure compared to the more mild-mannered Jones.<sup>570</sup> So too would he be a direct beneficiary of the museum's success. After all, the plan to build in the suburbs did not simply offer the prospect of free, private land on which to build—a major plus in the eyes of the penny-pinching developer.<sup>571</sup> It also offered the chance for a new cultural district to become another arrow in the Country Club District's quiver. By the time the Nelson-Atkins was in the planning stages, the Country Club District was entering its most expansive period of growth. Neighborhood streets were quickly filling up with new homes, and the Plaza was buzzing with activity mere blocks from the Oak Hall site. Nichols (and several others who were champions of the city's suburban successes) doubtless spotted the potential for the area to be a hub for cultural industries. This next wave of decentralization, Nichols doubtless thought, would further enhance the appeal of the southern districts, as well as make them feel even more bounded to the civic landscape. The Nelson-Atkins could be the brightest star in his suburban-oriented constellation of urban glory—a reality Nichols affirmed when he regularly referred to the new fixture as “his” museum (just as he referred to “his” Plaza) while leading visitors on tours.<sup>572</sup>

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<sup>569</sup> Nelson's fortune had essentially tricked down to four individuals—his wife Ida, daughter Laura, son-in-law Irwin, and family attorney Frank Rozzelle—all of whom died between 1921 and 1927. In other words, the monies for all components of the museum—the building, art works, maintenance, and staffing—were available by the end of the '20s, and the trustees could go forward with a museum that had been in the works for decades.

<sup>570</sup> See Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 161.

<sup>571</sup> Kirkwood had deeded the land to the city in 1926 and subsequently died of a heart attack the following year.

<sup>572</sup> Wolferman recounts these details from two interviews with former Nelson-Atkins staff members.



Nichols and Jones had something else in common: neither knew much about art save for its ability to act as a basic symbol of sophistication and class position. Without a substantial set of cultural industries, Kansas City boasted few figures with the expertise to run a major museum. Just as Nichols had done with recruiting Edward Delk as his primary housing architect, he and Jones looked to the East Coast, whose storied museums could provide potential candidates to lead the Nelson-Atkins in its formative years. For the director position, the trustees opted for Paul Gardner, a Boston-born, San Francisco-raised MIT and George Washington University graduate who had approached museum curating through an education in both architecture and history, with a side gig in classical ballet in Washington, D.C. Holidays in Europe and supplemental studies at the Sorbonne had enhanced his tastes, and at less than forty years of age in 1930, Gardner was surely one of the youngest directors of a major American art museum.<sup>573</sup>

Gardner would prove to be an upstanding and effective leader (albeit one often dominated by the assertive Nichols), but the professional art advisors chosen by the trustees and Gardner would prove to be less so. Once again looking to the bastions of artistic privilege, the trustees hired four men—the most influential and eccentric of whom was Harold Woodbury Parsons, a man who appeared “composed of perfectly manicured baby fat” and whose accent was “an effervescent combination of Boston and Oxford, cadenced in a never-ending chain of skillful pleasantries.”<sup>574</sup>

With Parsons, the trustees had given a great deal of power to a man who famed curator Thomas Hoving would later characterize as simultaneously pretentious and “charmingly dishonest.”<sup>575</sup> A 1904 Harvard graduate, Parsons admitted that his path to a career in art advising owed much to his own laziness. Universally accepted by those he met on his first trip to Kansas City, Parsons moved, in opposition to many local experts, to build a collection around Old Masters and original works in other areas rather than to build a substantial collection in an underdeveloped field. Such a perspective befitted a man of European snobberies who lived in an apartment with a private secretary in New York and owned both a car and seventy-five-foot yacht in Italy. It was no surprise either that Parsons cautioned against buying pieces that he viewed as glorified archaeological relics. (In sharp contrast, University of Missouri Professor John Pickard suggested, incisively, that the museum should specialize in the nationally underrepresented field of southwestern art.)<sup>576</sup>

The naiveté of the trustees was evident not only in their hiring of Parsons, but also in their initial agreement about how he would acquire artworks. When hired by the Nelson-Atkins, Parsons also worked as the European representative for the Cleveland Museum of Art, a position the Nelson-Atkins trustees agreed he could keep. The arrangement led to a questionable method: Parsons would offer art works to the Cleveland Museum first and then send Kansas City the leftovers—a scheme that the trustees felt would “seldom work to the disadvantage of the Nelson trust” because “the Cleveland Museum collection is rather complete.”<sup>577</sup>

The damage done by this unsavvy arrangement is unknowable, but what was clear was that there was a deep gulf between the cultural perspectives of the real-estate minded trustees and the men they had hired. While Nichols and Jones looked at their museum’s endowment in terms that befitted conservative investors, Parsons was far more cavalier in his vision. He was convinced that the Nelson-Atkins total assets, which stood at over \$13 million in 1930 and included over \$2 million available for

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<sup>573</sup> “May We Present Paul Gardner,” *Future* 1, no. 26 (July 5, 1935): 5.

<sup>574</sup> Quote by Hanns Swarzenski of the Boston Museum of Fine Art, in Thomas Hoving, *King of the Confessors* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 92, quoted in Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 87.

<sup>575</sup> Thomas Hoving, *King of the Confessors*, 165,169, cited in Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 87.

<sup>576</sup> Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 88-89.

<sup>577</sup> Nelson Trust, Trustees’ Minutes, October 31, 1928, file 4945, C 2582, SHSMO-KC; quoted in Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 86.

art purchases, could through a series of wise purchases elevate Kansas City's new institution above all in the country outside of New York.<sup>578</sup> The Metropolitan Museum of Art, he claimed, was the only museum with equal buying power—a reality that made him feel more than slighted when Nichols and Jones complained about prices and expressed, by his estimation, an inadequate appreciation of rare pieces, all while other museums bought with confidence.<sup>579</sup>

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Additional asynchronies surfaced when the leadership confronted the terms of Nelson's will, which spelled out a vision for an institution imbued with Progressive Era standards. The purchased art works were to be housed in a building provided by the public—a nearly impossible task by the 1920s, when getting the city simply to support maintenance costs was a stretch. Additionally, works purchased by the trustees were also not to leave Kansas City, a problematic requirement given that museums frequently loaned works out in return borrowing other museums' pieces.

The trustees managed to navigate around these stipulations, but Nelson's "thirty-year rule" proved as difficult to avoid. The rule stipulated that the trust could only be used to buy "works or reproductions of the works of artists who have been dead at least thirty years at the time of the purchase of the same."<sup>580</sup> This requirement did more than simply reveal a dated perspective. It also opened the wounds of the city's insecurities about cultural development. If Nelson had viewed this policy as a form of insurance protecting the museum's reputation, by the late 1920s journalists mocked the "absurd provision" as not only old-fashioned, but as proof of one of the primary "frailties of the Kansas City psychology," an "unwholly unnecessary inferiority complex" brought on by a culture oriented towards agriculture and distribution.<sup>581</sup> One writer even interpreted the rule as reflective of a "queasy pose rather than an ingrained love of sheer beauty." "Nelson, who seemingly squirmed under secret doubts about his own artistic judgment," he wrote, "made sure that no subsequent mentors of the public taste would haul off and disgrace the gallery by handing some artistic flippancy on which 'posterity had not placed its stamp of approval.'"<sup>582</sup>

Justified or not, these comments revealed the reality that the art world had changed dramatically in both thought and practice since Nelson's death. Old Masters and naturalism might have dominated the art world in the 1890s and 1900s, but beginning with events like the storied 1913 Armory Show in New York—the first international showcase that gave modern art a public platform—Americans began to receive large doses of avant-garde works that had begun to emerge out of European galleries in the century's first decade. Many members of the old guard, including President Teddy Roosevelt, found the works' challenge to traditional aesthetics and themes threatening, but the public for the most part felt differently. The Art Institute of Chicago's purchase of its first modernist work (Henri Matisse's "At the Window") in 1921 signaled the break of the style beyond the East Coast, and by the end of the decade, artists like Rodin, Picasso, Matisse, and Duchamp had become household names for middle- and upper-middle-class consumers across America.<sup>583</sup>

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<sup>578</sup> "Art Fund to Two Million," *Kansas City Star* (May 10, 1930).

<sup>579</sup> Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 95-96.

<sup>580</sup> Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 162-165.

<sup>581</sup> O'Sheel, "Kansas City," 377.

<sup>582</sup> Hogan, *Colonel Nelson's Artistic Boneyard*, 3, 5.

<sup>583</sup> "Chicago Buys Its First Modernist Canvas, a Matisse," *American Art News* 20, no. 2 (October 22, 1921): 1; Chuck Myers, "Stieglitz Exhibit Details His Impact On American Art," *Chicago Tribune* (March 6, 2001).

The thirty-year rule, however, made it difficult for the Nelson-Atkins to build a collection of contemporary painting to match older works—a situation that was easy to glimpse on a stroll through the museum’s galleries. While its stated aim was to give as comprehensive a survey as possible to the history of painting,” it was clear that such a history was severely circumscribed.<sup>584</sup> The allowance for donations of modern works and formation of an independent group, the Friends of Art, for buying and donating contemporary works to the collection had some impact, but patrons visiting the museum shortly after its opening would see that the “history of art” was overwhelmingly confined to Italian, French, German, and Flemish schools of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, supplemented with a few dashes of ancient works, most notably from China. By 1940, after another seven years of acquisitions, only thirty works of contemporary art dotted the collection of over 200 displayed pieces.<sup>585</sup>

The result was a new museum that felt strikingly out of step with contemporary trends. (Figure 33) The “light of the 20th century failed to dispel the darkness of medievalism” in the formation of the Nelson-Atkins collection, wrote journalist Charles Hogan after a visit.<sup>586</sup> In the thirty-four separate gallery rooms, a fine but insufficient showing of “living art” languished in the shadow of a collection of “religious mawkishness” that was “buzzing with the wings of angels and awash with the tears of the martyred Christ.” Visitors, and especially the youth that the museum so desperately courted, were bound to tire of this dull religiosity. As Hogan described, “with one saddle shoe pointing vaguely toward a frowning portrait of St. John the Baptist (Bernardo Daddi 1320-1348) and the other ... aimed impatiently at a panel depicting the Annunciation (Agnolo Gaddi) of about the same period, the gloriously free slick chick of today listens to a dusty dissertation on the hidden beauty lurking behind these dismal portrayals of equally dismal subjects. ... From then until they are liberated, the kids walk with God and his disciples, through room after clammily illuminated room. The bored boys have their hands jammed into their pockets, the girls fold their arms and slip into the ungraceful but somehow charming slouch of today’s sub-debs, as the breathless news is imparted to them that the room into which they have been inveigled contains a solid smear of frescoes and painted wood panels, properly cracked and aged, depicting ... another batch of dolorous saints.”<sup>587</sup>

Certain environmental features of the museum seem to have exacerbated the sense of mournful gloom. The museum’s lighting scheme, praised by many as one of the first major systems to artificially illuminate its galleries, provided in its “close approximation of the cold north light which artist cherish” a “milky iciness” that intensified the undynamic, dated quality of the art. “There is ease, roominess and serene perfection in these chambers,” admitted Hogan, “but there is no warmth.” The gloomy religious pall was exemplified by a fixture called the “Masterpiece of the Month,” an installation that featured a single work of art from the main collection relocated to a small room “darker than two chunks of coal in a cave” decorated with black velvet. The “masterpiece” of note was “carefully spotlighted to “gleam with startling perfection in the gloom.” As a “stygian shrine,” the monthly installation was “a masterful display of dead things in a dead setting.”<sup>588</sup> The result was an institution that cried out for disruption. “The gallery is as implacably overpowering as a glacier. There is a crying need for some irreverent dog to barge down the spacious, sound-proofed corridors whooping ‘Minnie the Moocher’ at the top of his voice.”<sup>589</sup>

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<sup>584</sup> *The William Rockhill Nelson Collection*, 124.

<sup>585</sup> *The William Rockhill Nelson Collection* (Kansas City, MO: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 1941), passim.

<sup>586</sup> Hogan, *Colonel Nelson’s Artistic Boneyard*, 17, 23.

<sup>587</sup> Hogan, *Colonel Nelson’s Artistic Boneyard*, 3, 11.

<sup>588</sup> Hogan, *Colonel Nelson’s Artistic Boneyard*, 17.

<sup>589</sup> Hogan, *Colonel Nelson’s Artistic Boneyard*, 15-16.

In response to such charges, museum proponents could point to clear victories. In the early 1930s, after all, the trustees, with a solid endowment in a buyers' market, were in an enviable position. Prices of art had plummeted since the onset of the Depression as many families and institutions sold off art to avoid insolvency. In 1935, many works were priced at half their 1925 values or less.<sup>590</sup> El Greco's *The Penitent Magdalene*, Guardi's *Entrance to the Grand Canal, Venice*, Corot's *The Willow Grove*, and Van Gogh's *Olive Grove* were a few of the high-quality works the museum was able to acquire in its early years.



Figure 33: Visitors admiring medieval armor in Kirkland Hall, the museum's central atrium.  
*MVSC, KCPL*

The museum's most unique success, however, came in the category of Chinese art. Deciding in 1926 to pursue an artistic category ignored by all but three East Coast museums, the trustees recruited Langdon Warner—a former Harvard classmate of Nichols and a world authority on Chinese art—to scope out possible works on a 1931 trip to China that he was undertaking for Harvard's Fogg Museum. While Warner returned with several quality purchases from the \$30,000 line of credit the trustees had given him, the real stroke of luck was Warner's recruitment of his former student Laurence Sickman, who agreed to continuously seek out pieces for the Nelson-Atkins for a modest fee from his base in Peking. Negotiating his way into the backrooms of the city's markets—rooms where important works from the country's interior were stored—Sickman had access to pieces that

<sup>590</sup> Richard H. Rush, *Art as an Investment* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1961), 376; Robert C. Vitz, "Struggle and Response: American Artists and the Great Depression," *New York History* 57, no. 1 (January 1976): 92.

would have been unavailable to standard dealers at far cheaper prices that he would have encountered in Paris or New York. Bidding on treasures against other powerful figures and firms, the 27-year-old buyer began sending crates of paintings, sculpture, porcelains, coats, bronze vessels, jade, and even a dismantled temple ceiling to Kansas City's new museum, where they adorned a room whose soft red walls served to "smack you in the eye with uproarious color."<sup>591</sup>

In addition to praising the Chinese collection, critics typically agreed that the Nelson's exhibitions were excellent. Shortly after its opening, the museum worked its way into major art circuits to host impressive exhibits originating in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. In the wake of its wide-ranging opening exhibition, which featured traditional and contemporary works from museums like the Whitney, Cleveland Museum, and even the Louvre, the Nelson-Atkins hosted a number of exhibits that were wide in scope and appeal. In the spring of 1935, "One Hundred Years of French Painting, 1820-1920" brought patrons face to face with works by the likes of Cezanne, Gauguin, Manet, Matisse, Seurat, and Van Gogh. The following January, the "Art of Soviet Russia" featured fifty paintings and nearly two hundred pieces of graphic art from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Later that year, French art returned with an exhibition of Impressionist landscapes that included twenty-four by Monet in addition to works by Degas and Renoir. In the winter of 1940, the "Seventh Anniversary Exhibition" featured works by German, Flemish, and Dutch masters.<sup>592</sup>

Yet the excellence of the transient collections only underscored the unsatisfactory quality of the museum's European works, a reality that was suggested by the swift fate of its initial purchase—a set of ten eighteenth-century European portraits and landscapes of which Parsons had approved. When the trustees announced the purchase in 1930, reactions by local papers suggested the shortcomings of the museum leadership's judgment. Lauded by the *Kansas City Star* as "Ten Masterpieces ... All of Great Beauty and Outstanding Importance ... An Impressive List of Authenticated Paintings," the works were deemed by the more honest *Kansas City Journal-Post* as less than adequate.<sup>593</sup> "The paintings themselves are not outstanding examples of either that particular school and period or of the individual painters."<sup>594</sup> That assessment turned out to be accurate; a little over ten years later, five of the ten paintings were deemed "as not up to museum standards" by Gardner, and in 1947 four of them appeared on a list of paintings recommended to be sold or traded.<sup>595</sup>

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If the museum's collection bore the imprint of Nelson's thirty-year rule and the conservative tastes of Gardner and Parsons, its administration was colored by the methods of J. C. Nichols. The relationship between Gardner and Nichols, for example, reflected Nichols' tendency to view the museum in the same shrewd terms he employed as a real estate man. Nichols chose Gardner for his art expertise, but denied to give him full authoritative power over purchases, appointments, gift acceptances, and especially financials. His talents at micromanaging came into full focus with Gardner's interactions

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<sup>591</sup> Hogan, *Colonel Nelson's Artistic Boneyard*, 16; Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 98-104.

<sup>592</sup> The programs for these exhibitions are held in the Spencer Research Library at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.

<sup>593</sup> "Ten Masterpieces Form the First Nelson Gallery Group," *Kansas City Star* (April 17, 1930). Cited in Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 205n12. See also "Art Display Draws 800," *Kansas City Times* (April 21, 1930), clipping in Art Reference Scrapbook, Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 205n13.

<sup>594</sup> *Kansas City Journal-Post* (May 11, 1930).

<sup>595</sup> Ethlyne Jackson to Herbert V. Jones, August 11, 1945, Trustees folder, file I, and "Paintings recommended for sale or swap or trade," 1947, Collection: Objects for Exchange folder, file II, DF, N-A; "Checklist of European Paintings on Exhibit," Docents' Papers, Kristie Wolferman Personal Collection. All in Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 205n14.

with potential donors, which Nichols directed with an almost laughable specificity. In developing the Country Club District, Nichols had learned the importance of stroking the egos of wealthy couples—a skill easily transferred to his practice of cultivating donors for the museum.<sup>596</sup>

Nichols' approach certainly helped color the museum's collection of donated works. As a penny-pincher whose obsession with control kept acquisition power partly in his hands, Nichols accepted many mediocre works. In contrast to the diplomatic yet principled Gardner, Nichols would readily accept gifts from any donor regardless of their quality, ostensibly in the interest of cultivating loyalty. Where Gardner, a seasoned museum man, would have had no trouble with statements about "undistinguished works" or "inadequate offerings," Nichols' paramount interest seemed to be the egos of potential donors and homebuyers—members of his suburban kingdom whose sense of ownership in the community was paramount. On more than one occasion, Gardner had to instruct Nichols on the necessity of prioritizing the collection over donors' feelings: "I am frankly upset about the group of dolls," Gardner wrote in relation to one donation. "I can not see how by any stretch of the word they could be termed works of art. . . . I am sure you realize that I am as anxious as you to have gifts made to the Gallery, but I feel if we are to keep it from becoming a storehouse of undesirable material, that we have got to be more careful of the type of thing that we accept."<sup>597</sup>

Nichols' thriftiness and real-estate mentality—coupled with a market that was in virtual freefall—meant that Kansas City's museum would pay shockingly low prices for some major works. In February 1934, Nichols bought Savoldo's *Adoration of the Shepherds* from an owner in New York who had originally paid \$14,000 for the painting and was hoping to sell it for \$7,500. Nichols secured it for only \$3,000.<sup>598</sup> Such successes became familiar. Insisting on paying no more than \$8,000 for Pater's *L'Accord Parfait*, a work priced at \$14,000, Nichols finally acquired the painting for \$7,500. And when four pieces of Italian majolica porcelain hit the market for \$22,000, and Parsons got the price down to \$17,000, Nichols was still not satisfied. He worked the owner down to \$16,000 for the set—deemed by Parsons to be the finest in America save for one other set in the Cleveland Museum—and finally brought them to Kansas City for only \$12,500. Nichols had decided to pay cash to secure a final discount.<sup>599</sup>

Nichols delighted in such victories, which, along with other tendencies, revealed that Kansas City's museum was being run largely by a real estate man who was bringing the methods, sensibilities, and tendencies of land development into the art world. He frequently worked himself into frenzies when trying to finalize deals. He fumed about any leaking of details regarding negotiations. He was willing to overspend vis-à-vis the trust's income, arguing, much as he did in terms of his residential developments, that a good investment would pay off in the end. Such practices might have simply seemed shrewd, but Nichols' cost cutting measures back at the museum revealed a more miserly approach. For instance, he reportedly instructed docents to follow closely on the trails of patrons so that they could switch off lights immediately after the patrons left the galleries.<sup>600</sup>

The development of education and marketing at the museum also reflected the vision of a real estate developer. By the 1920s, educational outreach had become a standard part of running a

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<sup>596</sup> Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 161.

<sup>597</sup> Paul Gardner to J. C. Nichols, October 11, 1935, J. C. Nichols folder, file I, Directors Files, NAMA, quoted in Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 169.

<sup>598</sup> Nelson Trust, Trustees' Minutes, February 23, 1934, file 4965, C 2582, WHMC. Cited in Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 210n20.

<sup>599</sup> Nelson Trust, Trustees' Minutes, February 23, 1934, file 4965, and May 28, 1934, file 4966, C 2582, WHMC. Cited in Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 210n22.

<sup>600</sup> Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 169-172. See also Richard Rhodes, "Cupcake Land: Requiem for the Midwest in the Key of Vanilla," *Harper's* (November 1987): 51.

museum, as the Gilded Age mentality of artistic veneration had expanded to include a view of art as something to be consumed by the middle- and upper-middle classes, not only as cultural capital but also as educational capital.<sup>601</sup> Yet Nichols' consistently pushed for activities that revealed striking parallels with his suburban district. He and Gardner established a "Department of Junior Education" dedicated to drawing children and youth to the museum for guided visits and art lessons.<sup>602</sup> To boost general public attendance, he pushed Gardner to offer free admission on weekends and public holidays. Public lectures became the norm, and a carefully modeled (and highly influential) docent program ensured that most patrons were informed about the works they were looking at, and therefore aware of the value of the museum's holdings.<sup>603</sup> Tellingly, Nichols strategized the most about making "our gallery the most patronized ... in the entire country," and even suggested that a permanent staff member devote time to contacting private clubs throughout the Midwest to solicit visits to the museum.<sup>604</sup> It no doubt delighted Nichols that the Friends of Art—the affiliated art group dedicated to acquiring contemporary pieces—was socially on par with the Junior League and the private country clubs by 1940.<sup>605</sup>

It was no wonder that caricatures of the Nelson-Atkins usually featured "cooing clubwomen" who, as one critic lamented, "plant themselves firmly before some such monstrosity, flutter through their guide books and rhapsodize in shrill whispers: 'Oh, look Helen, here is that perfectly exquisite head from the 12th Egyptian Dynasty which Dr. Flutterfinger told us about at the last meeting.' 'Why, it's gorgeous! So-so-simple, don't you think. And yet so expressive.'" <sup>606</sup> Similar scenes appeared in more serious accounts too. At one point in *Mrs. Bridge*, Evan Connell's incisive novel about life in the Country Club District, the title character skips a country club luncheon to visit the Nelson-Atkins, where she stays until closing to admire the likes of Goya, Holbein, Durer, and Corot, "names at once so familiar and so meaningless." Inspired, she enrolls in a local painting class that meets three times a week. Yet creating art, Mrs. Bridge realizes, is not the same as admiring or talking about it, and even though she paints "with a certain gusto and feeling, and with not a bad eye," her interest wanes. "She attended regularly for almost a month, skipped one night, got to several more, skipped three, attended spasmodically for another month, and finally dropped out altogether."<sup>607</sup>

Such a scene hit on one of the major themes of Kansas City's art consumption—joked about by visiting journalists and acknowledged in seriousness by local writers. The average art-gazing member of the Kansas City public, wrote *The New Republic*, remains "unmoved to either rapture or rage" at the sight of even excellent art.<sup>608</sup> Another local journalist, writing after the Nelson-Atkins' first ten paintings were unveiled in advance of the opening, remarked that while there was "general delight," there was "little talk of technique and style, except among the artists present."<sup>609</sup> A different critic was even more careful to characterize "those art-lovers who devote but fifteen minutes after a Sunday outing to the Nelson Gallery."<sup>610</sup> Writing about his visit to see a loan exhibition of French

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<sup>601</sup> Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 148.

<sup>602</sup> *The William Rockhill Nelson Collection* (Kansas City, MO: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 1941), 171-172.

<sup>603</sup> Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 147-159.

<sup>604</sup> J. C. Nichols to H. V. Jones, January 18, 1934, Trustees folder, file I, NAMA; In Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 172.

<sup>605</sup> Coleman, *The Kansas City Establishment*, 61.

<sup>606</sup> Hogan, *Colonel Nelson's Artistic Boneyard*, 20.

<sup>607</sup> Evan S. Connell, *Mrs. Bridge* (1959; repr., San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 92-93.

<sup>608</sup> O'Sheel, "Kansas City," 377.

<sup>609</sup> "Art Display Draws 800," *Kansas City Times* (April 21, 1930), clipping in Art Reference Scrapbook. Wolferman, *The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, 205n13.

<sup>610</sup> "The Nelson Gallery's Loan Exhibit," *Future* 1, no. 15 (April 19, 1935): 7.

masters, the writer recounts being caught up in the “educational” program of an Easter Egg Hunt. “I extricated myself in the south vestibule and hid with Bacchus in a niche until the stampede passed. Physically I was unharmed, but my dignity suffered a breakdown when two nurses took me for a moron and followed me all the way to gallery 20 to see what I’d do next. They vanished, however, at the first sight of pictures.”<sup>611</sup>

An overabundance of sophomoric perspectives on fine art was not singular to Kansas City, nor was the propensity for members of its upper-middle class to embrace art during the 1920s and ‘30s as a powerful symbol of conspicuous consumption. While fine art had long been deployed by elites as what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls “objectified cultural capital,” the growing ranks of upper-middle class consumers in the 1920s began to use it to differentiate and accent their taste, just as they increasingly did with cosmetics, clothing, and new appliances.<sup>612</sup> In Kansas City, as elsewhere, people began visiting new galleries that hosted contemporary art exhibitions. They bought art to display in their dining and living rooms.<sup>613</sup> Fine art began to grace popular publications like *The Kansas City Star Magazine*, a culture-oriented weekly introduced in 1924 that often included—in addition to society notes, fashion discussions, travel writing, and biographies of socialites and power players—images of Old Master paintings that would have resonated with many Country Club District residents whose subdivisions were graced by marble forms harking to antiquity. In the 1930s, the J. C. Nichols Company established the annual Plaza Art Fair, a festive, open-air display and demonstration by local artists held in September on the sidewalks and streets of the Country Club Plaza.<sup>614</sup> (Figure 34)



Figure 34: The Plaza Art Fair in 1936.  
*J. C. Nichols Company Scrapbooks, SHSMO-KC*

<sup>611</sup> “Nelson Gallery,” *Future* 1, no. 16 (April 26, 1935): 7.

<sup>612</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. E. Richardson (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), 50.

<sup>613</sup> Kansas City even had a healthy number of independent galleries that dealt in contemporary art. At “The Little Gallery in the Woods,” a home-based gallery of arts enthusiast Effie Seachrest in the neighborhood just southeast of Rockhill, patrons could catch sight of a group of drawings from New York’s Rehn Gallery as well as some twenty paintings of Seachrest’s winter exhibit. These included works by Henry Lee McFee (an American cubist painter), Morris Kantor (a Belarusian-American realist), and Eugene Speicher (an American realist). In 1935, the American Photography Exhibit at Lighton Studios displayed an array of landscape photographs by international photographers. See “The Little Gallery in the Woods, 4928 Troostwood,” *Future* 1, no. 16 (April 26, 1935): 7; “Art,” *Future* 1, no. 22 (June 7, 1935): 7.

<sup>614</sup> Vitz, *Struggle and Response*, 89-91; Pearson and Pearson, *The J. C. Nichols Chronicle*, 126.



Most cities, however, did not construct new monumental art museums in tandem with these developments, nor did their art museums express such clear spatial and cultural ties to a suburban domain unprecedented in its attempt to embrace fine art as a landscape theme. That the Nelson-Atkins faced—both literally and figuratively—the city’s suburban domain and its ways of life made for a force field between the two that was unmatched. As visitors and Kansas Citians themselves drove past the statuary and fountains in the Country Club District, and then glimpsed portentous displays of European art in the museum nearby, it was hard not to see the two worlds as being linked. Nelson’s goal for a civic museum representing Kansas City as a whole had morphed into something far more specific: a museum, scaled for a grand metropolis, but shaped for the tastes, ideas, and satisfactions of a circumscribed suburban public that relished in daily reminders of its sophistication and place in the world.

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The Nelson-Atkins was not the only fixture that demonstrated the uneasy development of art in Kansas City. Across Oak Street, the Kansas City Art Institute (KCAI) emerged as an equally conflicted institution during the 1930s. KCAI had begun in 1885 like many art schools established in the late nineteenth century—as a sketch club for artistically-inclined members of the community. The school remained downtown until the late 1920s, when local businessman and arts patron John Vanderslice purchased the eight-acre estate of the late August R. Meyer (one of the city’s ardent boulevard proponents). Located in the Southmoreland area abutting Oak Hall (and across the park from the Sophian Plaza apartments), Meyer’s property was a prime location for a school that sought to piggyback on the grandeur and prestige of the Nelson-Atkins.<sup>615</sup> Seeing that the synergy between museum and school could jettison the city’s maturing economy of cultural institutions, Vanderslice pushed through a major addition to Meyer’s red-brick residence to create the school’s first academic building. KCAI was on its way, many thought, to its long anticipated goal to “reach both the artist and the public and to bring them together.”<sup>616</sup>

Yet in one major respect KCAI resembled its neighboring museum: it was an institution with a solid endowment and impressive facilities but a comparatively paltry talent lineup. The resulting sense of inferiority oozed between the lines of boosters’ glowing comments. As J. C. Nichols had written in a local magazine in 1925, “[o]ther cities of the United States, possibly, have larger schools and are housed in a more suitable and imposing structure than that which contains the Kansas City Art Institute, but it has been stated that no school in the United States enjoys so much practical encouragement from those who are in position to encourage and further their aims than the school of our own city.”<sup>617</sup> To gain “practical encouragement,” of course, was not the goal of most artists, nor was garnering the fawning attention of benefactors whose interest in the school’s status had nothing to do with art and everything to do with economic and cultural standing. That none of the promotional articles about the Institute spoke of successful graduates was yet another indication of its second-rate position.

Well aware of their situation, the school’s governors decided to expand the faculty—a move they thought could elevate KCAI’s reputation and appeal. Their eyes were set on Thomas Hart Benton, a Missouri native who had, become a household name across America after being featured on the cover of *Time* in December 1934, a first for any American artist. Benton, along with Iowan

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<sup>615</sup> Huselton, “Kansas City’s Art Museum Plan,” 501-502.

<sup>616</sup> Rossiter Howard, “Kansas City Art Institute Fosters Art Education,” *Citizens’ League Bulletin* (October 28, 1933), 193.

<sup>617</sup> “Kansas City Art Institute,” *The City Ice Man* 1, no. 11 (January 1925): 5.

Grant Wood and Kansas John Steuart Curry, was being promoted as the torchbearer of a newly coined school called Regionalism, an offshoot of the recent “American wave” movement whose nationalist sentiments were expressed through quintessentially American scenes by painters like Benton, Edward Hopper, and Charles Burchfield.<sup>618</sup> Devised by Kansas native Maynard Walker, an art dealer who had ascended the ranks of New York’s art hierarchy, the Regionalists produced works representing a legible and indigenous style of American art that, in deliberate contrast to the avant-garde and abstract expressionist styles inspired by European modernism, reflected realistic scenes of everyday life, often in the American midlands. The style would come with a promotional scheme to match; rather than pitching their work through the elite world of critics, curators, and dealers, the Regionalists’ would lean on the popular press and the mass market.<sup>619</sup>

The artistic boosters of Kansas City and the officials at KCAI thought that Benton’s fame and seemingly cutting-edge perspective would elevate the Institute’s profile to rival that of the regionally dominant Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>620</sup> *Time*, after all, had declared that the Regionalists were the most relevant and vibrant artists at work in the country given their focus on American subjects and rejection of European styles—a view that many conservative art critics, including Elanor Jewett of the *Chicago Tribune*, shared in a time of economic instability.<sup>621</sup>

Benton had more than his fame and a distinctively American edge. He also had an unmistakable style. Like other modernists (a label Benton had earned by the mid-1920s), Benton challenged the Gilded Age tendency to separate the domains of art and life. Yet as a realist who was transfixed by the machine age, Benton also sought to capture the paradoxical blend of frenzy and synthesis through images of unmatched dynamism. Next to the placid and focused canvases of Wood and Curry, Benton’s vibrantly colored works boiled with energy, with their rolling landforms, billowing cloudscapes, and muscular human figures displaying a series of undulating “bumps and hollows” that constituted his stylistic fingerprint.<sup>622</sup> Benton doubled down this animation by overlapping recessed forms and eschewing symmetry.<sup>623</sup> On any given painting, writes an important Benton biographer, “[t]he eye can never rest on a single object, but is always forcefully pushed through the composition, jumping from one object to another, not only racing over the surface but penetrating deeply into the pictorial space.”<sup>624</sup> In no other artist’s work did the subjects seem to be so turbulent, so alive, and so evocative of the energies of the modern era, even if they were in a rural scene where farmhands were still harvesting fields with manual horsepower.<sup>625</sup>

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<sup>618</sup> Matthew Baigell, “The Beginnings of the ‘American Wave’ and the Depression,” *Art Journal* 27, no. 4 (Summer 1968): 393, 398.

<sup>619</sup> Adams, *Tom and Jack: The Intertwined Lives of Thomas Hart Benton and Jackson Pollock* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), 194; Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 304-305.

<sup>620</sup> Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 267.

<sup>621</sup> Robert C. Vitz, “Struggle and Response: American Artists and the Great Depression,” *New York History* 57, no. 1 (January 1976): 92-3.

<sup>622</sup> Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 261-262; Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 4. Matthew Baigell outlines the development of Benton’s mature style between 1919 and 1926 in “Thomas Hart Benton in the 1920’s,” *Art Journal* 29, no. 4 (Summer 1970): 422-429.

<sup>623</sup> Baigell, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 96; Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 13-14, 16. Benton elaborated on his style in a series of articles in the mid- to late-1920s. See in particular “My American Epic in Paint,” *Creative Art* 3 (December 1928): 31-36. Benton’s use of vibrant colors and asynchrony owed much to the influence of Cézanne. See Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 37-38.

<sup>624</sup> Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 262.

<sup>625</sup> Erika Doss, “Catering to Consumerism: Associated American Artists and the Marketing of Modern Art, 1934-1958,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 26, no. 2/3 (Summer-Autumn, 1991), 144-145.

Benton's dynamic style was likely attractive to KCAI officials for another reason: it frequently mobilized scenes that viewed Midwestern agricultural and industrial productivity as America's heart and soul. As the "self-appointed vanguard of New Deal reform," Benton aimed to depict in his works "an atmosphere of energy and power that corresponded to the energies of a vast continent."<sup>626</sup> Yet as the son of a Democratic senator from one of Missouri's dominant political families, Benton would tend to lean on the view—long espoused by the Show-Me-State's populist rhetoric—that Missouri and its region harbored "the substance of every democratic drive in our history" and was consequently a paragon of the necessary republican spirit to combat the Depression.<sup>627</sup> As a result, Benton depicted America's promise overwhelmingly through Midwestern scenes of fields and factories where people represented a collective cultural citizenship through their common sweat equity and shared hand in "fulfilled needs."<sup>628</sup> There was no more ideal figure, in other words, to serve as the resident artist of Missouri's most productive metropolis in an era when the city aimed to paint itself as "America's greatest inland city."

Luckily for KCAI officials, Benton had also come to view the Midwest as an optimal working environment. During his two decades in New York, he had constantly feuded with artists who pursued avant-garde styles and left-wing thinkers who came to despise his affinities for the New Deal.<sup>629</sup> He found himself at particular odds with Alfred Stieglitz, husband of Georgia O'Keefe and owner of the famous gallery 291 (named for its Fifth Avenue address), a hallowed ground for many aspiring artists. After Stieglitz chided Benton for not capturing a more abstract style in some of his watercolors, Benton began to see his own interest in realism as being at odds with what he considered to be a series of "rigid taboos among the aesthetic elite" of New York's Eurocentric art world.<sup>630</sup> Subsequent experiences only hardened his view that New York represented an intellectual world that was self-cultivating, detached, and detrimentally introspective—a domain that was at odds with his idealized vision of the more democratic Midwest. "I was deeply antagonized to discover that cryptic significances were being attached ... to modern abstractions," he wrote in 1928 when discussing his *American Historical Epic*, only to clarify that those cryptic ideas were anathema to his cultural roots. "[T]he horse sense that remained in this Missouri lawyer's son ... revolted, and I began to wonder why ... I should continue to try getting representative meanings out of my art if I was going to put mystical ones in."<sup>631</sup>

By the mid-1930s, Benton's perspective had only intensified. Ongoing trips back to Missouri and the Midwest had reinforced his view that, in contrast to New York, the American midlands were "the least provincial area of America" in that they harbored "few aesthetic orthodoxies, cults, or conformist principles."<sup>632</sup> Suggesting lines of connection between straight-shooting, democratic Midwestern pragmatism and the "contagion of intellectual idiocy that rose to unbelievable heights" in New York, the plain spoken Benton chided Stieglitz and his admirers as "literary gigolos" whose use

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<sup>626</sup> Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 127; Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 262.

<sup>627</sup> Thomas Hart Benton, "Answers to Ten Questions," *Art Front* 1, no. 4 (April 1935): 2, quoted in Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 126. Benton's great-great uncle, also named Thomas Hart Benton, was a U.S. Democratic Senator from 1821-1851. Nicknamed "Old Bullion," Senator Benton was one of Congress' most ardent champions of Manifest Destiny.

<sup>628</sup> Earl Bennett, quoted in *Thomas Hart Benton*, Film, dir. Ken Burns (1988; Washington, DC, PBS), DVD.

<sup>629</sup> Greil Marcus, "Why I Live Where I Live," in *American Epics: Thomas Hart Benton and Hollywood*, ed. Austen Barron Bailey (New York: Prestel, 2015), 185.

<sup>630</sup> Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 134-135, 162-163.

<sup>631</sup> Thomas Hart Benton, "My American Epic in Paint," *Creative Art* (December 1928): xxx-xxxvi, quoted in Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 248.

<sup>632</sup> Baigell, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 93; Thomas Hart Benton, "Answers to Ten Questions," *Art Front* 1, no. 4 (April 1935): 2, quoted in Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 126.

of theory “as a God” rather than as a tool exonerated them from any real engagement with the world. Benton even put it in terms that accorded with his plain-spoken perspective: “Can you imagine [them] ... throwing a baseball straight?”<sup>633</sup>

Benton claimed that escaping back to the Midwest would be “to see what can be done for art in a fairly clear field less ridden with verbal stupidities,” yet he would find out shortly after his arrival in Kansas City in 1935 to take the position as head of painting at KCAI that the state’s burgeoning artistic center was more like New York than he bargained for.<sup>634</sup>

In many ways, Benton’s Kansas City years would prove to be his most productive. He had arrived in the city at the peak of his fame and was being paid a handsome salary (\$3,000 per year) by KCAI.<sup>635</sup> In 1937, he was featured in *Life* magazine, published his autobiography, and garnered critical praise for an exhibit of his work in Chicago.<sup>636</sup> More commissions followed, as did exhibitions that drew praise. The works he painted in Kansas City refined his approach to depict America through regional scenes, yielding, according to one historian, “his most American and, very likely, his best works.”<sup>637</sup>

Yet if Benton had found in Kansas City the most solid state of his “specifically American art,” so too did he experience the most turbulent period of his professional life.<sup>638</sup> There were plenty of salt-of-the earth folk a generation or two off of the farm in Kansas City, of course—the sort of people Benton described as “regular men and women ... you like because you can be yourself with them”—but so too, Benton acknowledged, “are to be found the same fairies, the same Marxist fellow travelers, the same ‘educated’ ladies purring linguistic affectations. The same damned bores that you find in the penthouses and studios of Greenwich Village hang onto the skirts of art in the Middle West.”<sup>639</sup>

Yet in his day-to-day experience in the halls of Kansas City’s growing cultural institutions, Benton constantly encountered a trifecta of perspectives that made his navigation of Kansas City’s artistic landscape far more tumultuous than he might have expected. Kansas City, after all, was a place whose artistic administrators were proponents of East Coast-inspired prestige, whose boosters were insecure about their city’s cultural legacy, and—in sharp contrast to many other cities—whose elites boasted an overrepresentation of moralist views that were anxious about what was depicted in artworks. Squeezed between these guiding tendencies, Benton would find limited acceptance for his gruff style, populist views, unconventional methods, and tendencies towards controversial subjects. Feuds between cultural institutions and artists were common to most large cities, but what made the tension between Benton and Kansas City’s artistic elites apropos was that Benton’s animosity towards the establishment revealed the very cultural tendencies they were hoping to obscure, as well as some fundamental realities about Kansas City’s culture of artistic patronage.

The first major struggle began just after Benton’s arrival, when, after a year of work, he completed a commissioned mural titled *A Social History of the State of Missouri* (1936) in the capitol building in Jefferson City. Charged with capturing the state’s past in compelling terms, Benton reached

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<sup>633</sup> Thomas Hart Benton, “American and/or Alfred Stieglitz,” *Common Sense* (January 1935): 22-25, Thomas Hart Benton to Alfred Stieglitz (December 24, 1934), both quoted in Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 249.

<sup>634</sup> “Interview,” *New York Sun* (April 12, 1935), quoted in Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 126.

<sup>635</sup> This translates to about \$52,000 today—a healthy amount given that Benton was also earning substantial commission fees and selling artworks.

<sup>636</sup> Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 259.

<sup>637</sup> Baigell, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 99.

<sup>638</sup> See Baigell, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 55.

<sup>639</sup> Thomas Hart Benton, *An Artist in America* (1936; repr., Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983), 274; “Benton,” *Kansas City Journal-Post* (April 29, 1941), quoted in Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 277; Benton, *An Artist in America*, 274.

for realism and embraced scenes illustrating “Missouri from start to finish” that made many polite and conservative types cringe.<sup>640</sup> In Benton’s images, Missouri appeared not as a Jeffersonian utopia, but as a tortured democracy in which glories were accompanied by tragedies. The expected scenes of fur traders, blacksmiths, political rallies, and riverboats shared the walls with vignettes depicting a flawed history rife with racial struggle and pervasive violence. Viewers encountered slaves ensnared in moments of brutality, the James Boys robbing trains and banks, and Frankie taking revenge on an unfaithful Johnny in a barroom.<sup>641</sup> Benton’s insistence on depicting the quiet heroism of everyday life was also a cause for protest; one of the most controversial images was of a woman wiping her baby’s bottom during courtroom proceedings.<sup>642</sup>

The mural’s Kansas City vignette drew an especially jaundiced eye. It emphasized, in addition to the Nelson-Atkins and Liberty Memorial, the gruesome slaughter of cattle, the lurid quality of the city’s nightlife, and the lineup of the city’s political hierarchy, with Tom Pendergast—at the peak of his notoriety in the mid-1930s—clearly in the driver’s seat. “I wouldn’t hang [Benton] on my shithouse wall,” quipped one state dignitary, echoing the sense felt by many that “Benton’s shown Missouri as nothing but honky-tonk, hillbillies, and robbers.”<sup>643</sup> The *Kansas City Star* felt differently, however, describing the mural and Benton’s style as “sometimes inspiring, sometimes a little ridiculous and even shady, but always intensely human.”<sup>644</sup>

If state and city boosters were offended by Benton’s historical veracity, moralists in Kansas City also took offense to the content of his writings. In 1937, he published *An Artist in America*, an expansive portrait of his life experiences and artistic theories. Lauded by Sinclair Lewis for its erudite yet clear prose and honesty, the volume quickly caught the attention of Kansas City’s stuffy artistic elites for its inclusion of lewd and profane discussions about masturbation, prostitution, and sexual desire. The ringleader of these moralists, a member of the elite and former director of KCAI named Howard Huselton, mounted a campaign to unseat Benton due to his poor representation of conservative Missouri values. During the summer of 1938, as Benton was crisscrossing the country on a sketching trip, Huselton presented six KCAI board members with copies of Benton’s book with the aforementioned passages underlined. At the board’s subsequent meeting, Benton’s name went unmentioned during a review of teaching contracts, suggesting that Huselton’s protests were giving them some pause.

The response from the general public signaled a different perspective—one that revealed the deep divisions between everyday Kansas City and its halls of institutional privilege. Most Kansas Citians, it turned out, seemed not to care much about Benton’s lewd prose, and in fact were still elated that he was in their midst. As the director of the nearby Midwestern Art Institute in Kansas City, Kansas, stated, it would be appalling if the “small time reformers trying to run Tom Benton out of town” won their case. “We can’t sit by and let these small time reformers try to run this man out of Kansas City.” KCAI alumni and the city’s bohemian crowd agreed, voicing their support through letters and public announcements. Public responses to a radio broadcast addressing the situation seemed to underscore the provincial nature of the protests against Benton. “Is that institute hiring an

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<sup>640</sup> Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 254.

<sup>641</sup> Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 255-258. The Missouri mural is reminiscent of Benton’s earlier and equally controversial mural depicting the history of Indiana. See Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 229-231.

<sup>642</sup> Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 259.

<sup>643</sup> Murray, director of the Missouri WPA, quoted in Jerre Gerlando Mangione, *The Dream and the Deal: The Federal Writers’ Project, 1935-1943* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 195; cited in Wolff, 259; Legislator quoted in Nancy Edelman, *The Thomas Hart Benton Murals in the Missouri State Capitol: A Social History of the State of Missouri* (Jefferson City: Missouri State Council on the Arts, 1975), 1; cited in Wolff, 258.

<sup>644</sup> *Kansas City Star* (December 21, 1936).

author or is it hiring an artist?” asked one caller, while another was even more direct: “Doesn’t the Middle West appreciate originality?”<sup>645</sup> Huselton’s snobbish response only underscored his aloof and elitist perspective on art and culture. “Those agitators . . . are of recent mushroom growth, artists and their followers who have no past knowledge of the art institute or of those who have built it to where it is today.”<sup>646</sup>

It was perhaps the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* that had the most incisive assessment of the situation that was brewing on the opposite side of the state. “It strikes the onlooker as odd that a morality movement in Kansas City should be directed against a distinguished American painter when the town reeks with far juicier material for those with the reformer’s urge.” Benton’s, off-color prose, after all, was more than fitting for Kansas City. “If the youth of Kansas City are to be saved from the ‘sensual, gross, profane and vulgar,’ a tour of . . . honkytonks, clip joints and strip tease dives would supply material enough to make Anthony Comstock turn over in his grave. . . . The Kansas City incident will chiefly serve to reflect upon the taste of those who engineered it.”<sup>647</sup> Huselton was overruled in his push for Benton’s dismissal, largely thanks to J. C. Nichols, who urged the KCAI trustees to keep Kansas City’s single most famous artist employed.<sup>648</sup> To fire him, he likely asserted, would be to risk humiliation among the art world—an outcome that could be disastrous for the city’s reputation.

Benton, after all, had transformed KCAI’s morale as well as its enrollment.<sup>649</sup> He immediately became an admired teacher, lauded in particular for his plain-spoken instruction and willingness to include students in his own artistic process. He “had a way of relating to his students that brought us together on common ground,” remembers pupil and eventual Regionalist Roger Medearis.<sup>650</sup> Teaching in a converted greenhouse on the grounds of KCAI, Benton led his students through a scrupulous investigation of artistic tradition and insisted they reach back to figures like El Greco, Tintoretto, Rubens, and even the Egyptian and Assyrian sculptors.<sup>651</sup> True to his intent to be the opposite of what he encountered in New York, Benton wished to be seen as a fellow worker of his students. “Without pretense, he wanted us to call him Tom,” recalls Medearis. “In conversation he spoke in a good-natured growl—direct, blunt, profane. His sentences often ended in mirth, the last three or four words emphasized by a rising inflection of wheezy chuckles.”<sup>652</sup> As befit an unpretentious educator, Benton denied the charges that he was effective, insisting in later years that the only thing he taught Jackson Pollock—his most famous protégé from his New York years—was “how to drink a fifth a day.”<sup>653</sup>

Students might have been comfortable with Benton’s unorthodox methods, but KCAI officials grew less so after he acted on his belief that gaining inspiration and experience outside the studio was critical to artistic innovation.<sup>654</sup> School officials would have likely expected outings into Kansas City’s elegant parks, but Benton considered the far reaches of the rural hinterland to be the optimal environment for finding one’s muse. In the spring of 1940, he led seven male and two female students through the Ozarks for a two-week sketching trip, during which one student lost his pants

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<sup>645</sup> Quoted in Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 281.

<sup>646</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>647</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 281-282.

<sup>648</sup> Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 182.

<sup>649</sup> Enrollment rose to 438 students, and the Institute’s president claimed during Benton’s first semester that “more enthusiasm had been shown in the opening of the Institute than ever before.” See Wolff, 267.

<sup>650</sup> Roger Medearis, “Student of Thomas Hart Benton,” *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 4, no. 3/4 (Summer-Autumn, 1990): 47.

<sup>651</sup> Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 268-269. See also Medearis, “Student of Thomas Hart Benton,” 47-50.

<sup>652</sup> Medearis, “Student of Thomas Hart Benton,” 48.

<sup>653</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>654</sup> Quoted in *New York Sun* (April 12, 1935); quoted in Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 269.

in a stream, a wild hog broke into the trunk to eat the students' food, and Benton drove one of the cars off the road. When a colorful chronicle of the trip appeared in the *Kansas City Times*, KCAI officials reacted with predictable disapproval.<sup>655</sup> According to Medearis, who notes that the school's trustees equated Benton's practice with desertion, "[h]e seemed to be some sort of corrupt Pied Piper leading his followers into the wilderness—males and females together without proper supervision, using primitive privies and bathing in the rivers, on an unscheduled, unauthorized lark."<sup>656</sup>

It did not help that Benton grew increasingly anti-institutional after arriving in Kansas City. As a self-described "public artist," Benton saw himself as a social reformer whose depictions of everyday people had the capacity to express quintessential democratic values in ways that were both appealing and intelligible to the masses.<sup>657</sup> Accordingly, Benton was also ardent about dismantling the association between quality art and institutional prestige—an aim that put him at odds with the officials and patrons who were trying to build an institution in the guise of the late-nineteenth-century artistic paradigm. If classical art in a grand building was a demonstration of objectified cultural capital (built, after all, according to the wishes of a man who was the epitome of Gilded Age cultural snobbery), Benton's view was that art should be fully public, accessible to all, unadulterated by the tangible and evanescent barriers imposed by the brick-and-mortar art museum and its associated social acts.

Benton's anti-institutional sentiments took a number of forms during his Kansas City tenure. As one of forty or so artists commissioned by a group called the Association of American Artists, Benton produced \$5 etchings and lithographs to be sold to middle-class buyers in a scheme designed to undermine the elite status of fine art through mass production.<sup>658</sup> (Benton quickly became the bestseller, with his fifty lithographs selling more than 12,000 prints.<sup>659</sup>) He also tested the relationship between art and big business; in a move that was anathema to many other artists, Benton took on corporate commissions to produce advertisements that he felt could intensify among readers the communal values espoused by New Deal ideology.<sup>660</sup>

Nothing, however, illustrated both Benton's genius as well as his aesthetic distance from many of Kansas City's conservative patrons as two allegorical nudes he painted in 1938 and 1939. The first, *Susannah and the Elders* (1938), transports the titular story from the Book of Daniel into a Midwestern landscape. The canvas features a nude Susannah steadying her way into a blue stream while grasping onto a nearby branch as two farmers—lecherous voyeurs who later blackmail her for sex in the original tale—gaze at her from behind a tree. Labelled by many local critics as a crass visage of a backwater scene (in great part because of the anatomical correctness and detail of Susannah's pelvic region), *Susannah* paled in comparison to the next canvas, which also transported a timeless myth into a prairie setting.<sup>661</sup>

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<sup>655</sup> Ibid.; "Rare Adventure for Art Students on Journey to Ozarks with Benton," *Kansas City Times* (May 13, 1940). See also Wolff, 4.

<sup>656</sup> Medearis, "Student of Thomas Hart Benton," 50.

<sup>657</sup> Elizabeth Broun, "Thomas Hart Benton: A Politician in Art," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 61.

<sup>658</sup> Erika Doss, "Catering to Consumerism: Associated American Artists and the Marketing of Modern Art, 1934-1958," *Winterthur Portfolio*, 26, no. 2/3. (Summer - Autumn, 1991): 152, 154. The AAA was the most successful of several groups aiming to sell art to a mass audience; other entities included the Contemporary Print Group, the Adolph Dehn Print Club, and the American Artists Group. See Doss, 155.

<sup>659</sup> Doss, "Catering to Consumerism," 152.

<sup>660</sup> Ibid., 156. Corporate pushback regarding Benton's unflinching social realism would dampen this initial enthusiasm, leading to a number of conflicts.

<sup>661</sup> Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 264.

*Persephone* (1939) reimagines the Greek myth of the daughter of Zeus and Demeter, who was abducted by Hades to become the eventual queen of the underworld and the personification of the cadence of the seasons. The work that one critic has called “one of the great works of American pornography” is an ingenious essay on ambiguity—of toeing the line between myth and reality, ancients and moderns, the sublime and the salacious.<sup>662</sup> The focal point is the nude Persephone herself, posed with hands behind her head as if in a simultaneous state of relaxation and performance, appearing like a classically rendered pin-up girl. She lounges on a lush riverbank that seems to hug her balanced and voluptuous proportions as an elderly farmer gazes voyeuristically at her from inches away around the rounded edge of the moss-covered trunk. In Benton’s trademark fashion, the curves of Persephone’s body, the loose curls of her black hair, the folds of her discarded red kimono, the billowing forms of leaves and foliage, and the contour of the horizon—all assert an overriding sense of motion in a scene that otherwise evokes pastoral quietude.

*Persephone* did not simply incite the moralizing tendencies of Kansas City’s artistic elite. It also reflected the various geographic dimensions that flavored the city. Echoing the billowing lushness of her surroundings, Persephone’s naked body stood as a metaphor of the “richness and fecundity” of the prairie landscape that was foundational to Kansas City’s economic livelihood.<sup>663</sup> In its theme of voyeurism in the Midwestern landscape, along with the likeness of Persephone to a dark-haired starlet, the painting jibed with the lewd and often lascivious reputation of Kansas City as a town whose soul was tied to the pulse of Twelfth Street strip clubs, cabarets, and theaters. And if their agricultural allusions tied the work to the prairie and plains, *Persephone* and *Susannah* also seemed to contain more than a whiff of Benton’s perspectives on the Upland South, that “great land for riotous whoredom” that he perceived as equal parts “Bible-quoting morality” and “sexual filth.”<sup>664</sup> One line from his autobiography describing this landscape could just as well have been a caption for either painting: “And I seen that woman a-washin’ herself in the brush, brother, with her paps a-stickin’ up, and the devil bein’ in me—.”<sup>665</sup>

Benton doubtless scandalized many elites with these nudes, but his Achilles heel was the disdain he directed at institutional officials. The Nelson-Atkins’ trustees, after all, had been intent on building their grand museum in the guise of the East Coast, and their consequential lineup of administrative talent—Paul Gardner, his consultants Harold Parsons and Thomas Hoving, and even the erudite Laurence Sickman—were all products of elite schools that were unapologetically Eurocentric in their outlooks.<sup>666</sup> Benton viewed them as members of the very urban intelligentsia that he thought he could escape in a place like Kansas City.<sup>667</sup> Gardner himself would tell an audience in Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1936 that he was appalled at the sort of modernism that Benton and others were painting: “What must foreigners think when they come to our galleries and see displayed pictures of

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<sup>662</sup> Quoted in Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 265.

<sup>663</sup> Adams, *Tom and Jack*, 206.

<sup>664</sup> Benton, *An Artist in America*, 95.

<sup>665</sup> *Ibid.*, 97. That sense of sexual titillation was also a part of the painting’s creation. “She’s so beautiful that you go away muttering for the rest of the day,” said Benton of the model who posed for the painting at KCAI in a series of sessions captured by German photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt for *Life* magazine in 1939. Benton’s gaze at the model might uncomfortably echo the preying eyes of the farmer, but the process also illustrated—much to the awe of many students—the process by which a living scene became art in Benton’s experience-based perspective. Capturing an artist “committed to visceral, sensorial experience,” the photos brought to light the artistic process Benton advocated—an all-in-this-together experience that saw a work of art come to life in the context of a vibrant, collaborative studio in which tangible contact with a painting’s sensations was tantamount to artistic truth. See Medearis, “Student of Thomas Hart Benton,” 47; Wolff, 264-266.

<sup>666</sup> Henry Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton: An American Original* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 252.

<sup>667</sup> Baigell, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 93.



bread lines, of squalid tenement scenes? ... Why should [our artists] persist in painting the uglier side of existence and calling it the 'American scene?'"<sup>668</sup> As one historian makes clear, "whatever the actual abilities of its members ... the staff of the Nelson epitomized the tone of pretentious refinement that Benton had blasted in his 'Farewell to New York.'"<sup>669</sup>

Had Benton simply countered by defending the social importance of his everyday scenes, onlookers could have chalked up the disagreement to a simple matter of ideological difference. Yet Benton voiced his attacks in a far more toxic way—via a strain of vicious homophobia. Benton's prejudice was doubtless the product of his upbringing. While his dominating father viewed artists as "bootlicking" dandies, his mother encouraged his creative pursuits, causing a figurative tug-of-war in Benton's life that he partly resolved by pursuing art that veered towards masculine subjects.<sup>670</sup> An unwanted sexual advance from a male friend in Chicago in 1907 seemed to solidify his prejudice.<sup>671</sup> In 1912, before moving to New York, Benton had entertained the possibility of moving to Kansas City, but decided against it after discovering the tolerance for homosexuality and gender-bending practices among the city's art students.<sup>672</sup>

By the time he had arrived in Kansas City, Benton had hardened his prejudice and mapped it onto his disdain for elitist artistic culture and institutional snobbery. "Homosexuals are very important factors in the museums and galleries of the cities," Benton wrote in 1937. "In an important training school of taste, appended to one of the great eastern universities, they have made deep inroads, and potential directors of museums emerge from the sanctums of this institution with a lisping voice and mincing ways." He was especially afraid of the effect such figures had on museum policy and the resulting public perception of art. For Benton, homosexuality was a threat "because of its effects on the minds of those who support such institutions, who are apt, especially in the West, to confuse all art with sexual oddity and refuse to have anything further to do with it." As if to explain his own provincial fears, he concluded that "the people of the West are highly intolerant of aberration."<sup>673</sup>

By the early 1940s, it was clear that such statements were a response to the artistic impotence Benton felt as the ground beneath him was shifting. After all, the New Deal ideals he had so assiduously painted had not become a full reality, Regionalism had gone into decline as an artistic style, and the promise of acting as a social reformer through corporate collaboration had turned sour, with Benton feeling more like an aesthetic servant than a reformer.<sup>674</sup> The sense of threat he felt was clear when he released the most damning statement of his career in 1941 in an *Art Digest* article. "Do you want to know what's the matter with the art business in America?" he inquired. "It's the third sex and the museums. Even in Missouri we're full of 'em. The typical museum is a graveyard run by a pretty boy with delicate wrists and a swing in his gait. If it were left to me, I wouldn't have any museums."<sup>675</sup>

Benton's vicious remarks sent shock waves through the art world. Reprinted in numerous newspapers and magazines, his words—and his American scene style—were swiftly denounced by

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<sup>668</sup> Quoted in Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 253-4.

<sup>669</sup> Adams, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 254.

<sup>670</sup> Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 37, 281; Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 35. Benton's short stature—he stood only five-foot-three—also contributed to his efforts to buttress his masculine persona, something he regularly did in self-portraits that greatly exaggerated his size. See, for instance, his *Self-Portrait with Rita* (1922).

<sup>671</sup> Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 37; Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 74-75. Wolff reconstructs this scene from an unpublished account by Benton. See Benton, "Chicago—1907-08," 32, manuscript, reel 2326, Thomas Hart Benton Papers, 1906-1975. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

<sup>672</sup> Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 131.

<sup>673</sup> Benton, *An Artist in America*, 266.

<sup>674</sup> Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 280-281.

<sup>675</sup> Thomas Hart Benton, "Blast by Benton," *Art Digest* 15 (April 15, 1941): 6, 19, quoted in Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 281; and Justin Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton: A Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 272.

critics. Knowing that Benton's fall from grace could tarnish Kansas City's artistic reputation—and that his attacks had been directed at individual trustees, curators, and administrators at the museum from which KCAI drew much of its prestige—the KCAI trustees fired Benton on May 5, 1941. In response, at least one other faculty member resigned and countless students dropped out of the program, damaging both their own careers along with the school's reputation. The man who had gained an enviable livelihood from Kansas City and its artistic elites had in the end embarrassed and betrayed them, yet it was hard not to acknowledge the truth of Benton's final, mean-spirited comments about Kansas City's troubled arts institution "Without me," he asserted, "the Kansas City Art Institute will drop back to the kind of third rate joint it was before I came."<sup>676</sup>

But Benton's final attack was also directed at the artistic power structure of a city that had in one respect deeply disappointed him. Benton was ignorant to align sexual orientation to artistic tendencies, but he was accurate in one respect: Kansas City's institutional officials were perfect examples of "critics and museum boys" who saw art "as a collection of objects rather than as a living necessity of the spirit of man."<sup>677</sup> If Benton had thought that Kansas City had the possibility of being an ideal environment for his views—including the perspective that quality art should be hung "in privies ... saloons, bawdyhouses, Kiwanis and Rotary clubs, and Chambers of Commerce—even women's clubs" rather than in museums—then he had failed to account for the fact that its boosters were prioritizing a cultural coming of age that held dated and snobbish notions of fine art as paramount.<sup>678</sup>

While Benton turned out to be a problematic choice for KCAI, he was the ideal personification of Kansas City's defining culture war—the struggle between "houn' dawg" and "high art" that Henry Haskell had explained was foundational to Kansas City's history. Benton's upbringing in Neosho, Missouri—a town at the southwest extreme of the state on the threshold of the Ozarks—meant that scenes of hardscrabble subsistence were readily accessible. Yet with his father's election to U.S. Congress in 1897, Benton was also exposed to the halls of education and political power that would sharpen his abilities at digesting complex intellectual material. Many saw this bifurcated upbringing in Benton's personality. Described by his friend Thomas Craven in 1937 as "half-hobo and half-highbrow," Benton was an artist who constantly obscured his intellectualism and privileged background with a plainspoken and often crude facade. "He was an introspective, thinking man ... very well read ... but he didn't want anybody to know it," remembers folksinger Burl Ives. As another friend remembers, Benton wished to be seen as "a hard drinking tough guy who happened to be an artist"—a fitting description of a man whose work fed off classical precedents to portray the unvarnished and gritty realities of everyday life.<sup>679</sup>

Despite his fallout with the KCAI, Benton stayed put, citing that he appreciated the city's rural and populist undertones. "I like Kansas City," he told a *Kansas City Journal-Post* reporter in 1941. "It's a good place to live. Rocks stick out of the ground and you have to look up and down hills to see things. Flowers grow easily and there's a lot of redbud in the spring."<sup>680</sup> The everyday people were easy to get along with. And so too did the rural domain seem unusually accessible: "From where I live

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<sup>676</sup> Quoted in Wolff, 272.

<sup>677</sup> Thomas Hart Benton, "Art vs. the Mellon Gallery," *Common Sense* 10 (June 1941): 172-173; cited in Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism*, 281.

<sup>678</sup> Benton, "Blast by Benton," 9, 16.

<sup>679</sup> Quoted in Adams, *Tom and Jack*, 21-22; Thomas Craven, "Thomas Hart Benton," *Scribner's Magazine* (October 1937), 38; quoted in Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 277; Dan James, quoted in *Thomas Hart Benton*, Film, dir. Ken Burns (1988; Washington, DC, PBS), DVD.

<sup>680</sup> "Benton," *Kansas City Journal-Post* (April 29, 1941), quoted in Wolff, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 277; Benton, *An Artist in America*, 274.

I can take my car and in a few minutes run past the junk heaps and gaudy signs of Kansas City into deep country. . . . In a few hours I can be in the utter backwoods.”<sup>681</sup>

If Benton believed, as Matthew Baigell has suggested, that “American cultural history . . . generally grew from rural pressures on urban centers,” then he proved in the end that such pressures were not confined to style.<sup>682</sup> Benton’s rural sensibilities might have colored his art with a refreshing degree of populism, accessibility, and realism, but so too did his views throw a shadow over his effort to be a reformer in Kansas City’s artistic world. If the Nelson and KCAI trustees hoped that their art museum would obscure what remained of their city’s bawdy reputation, Benton ended up standing in the way. What had once seemed a once-in-a-lifetime possibility—to count a famous and pathbreaking artist among the city’s creative class—had turned into an embarrassing fiasco. Yet maybe Harry Haskell had a point when he wrote in 1925 about the “grim battle” in Kansas City between “the civilization of the go-getter tempered by the houn’ dawg” and the “civilization of beauty.” “Sometime one gets the upper hand, sometimes the other.” And as Benton’s personality, politics, and painting made plain, “the marks of the conflict, of the ebbs and flow of battle, are everywhere.”<sup>683</sup>

### ***The Birth of Kansas City Jazz***

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? . . .  
*Or does it explode?*  
—Langston Hughes

As Kansas City’s South Side saw its new cultural district take shape around the Nelson-Atkins and the Kansas City Art Institute, a different set of conditions was catalyzing the rise of the city’s genuine art form in the urban core. “Kansas City had the cream of those days,” remembers jazz booking agent John Tumino. “You know why? Because the town was wide open and every joint had a band.”<sup>684</sup> Tumino was right. After Pendergast cemented his power in 1925, he and Johnny Lazia established a network of vice-friendly venues where money from liquor, prostitution, drugs, and gambling could flow into the machine’s pockets. Most of these venues were nightclubs, and in the 1920s, nightclubs almost always featured live music as a draw for patrons.

Aiming to minimize potential political pushback, Pendergast moved to establish his sanctioned vice industry within the boundaries of the city’s increasingly circumscribed African-American district. Between 1900 and 1930, Kansas City’s black population had grown by 119 percent to total nearly 39,000—the majority of whom resided in an area roughly bounded by Twelfth and Twenty-Seventh Streets on the north and south and Oak Street and Prospect Avenue on the west and east.<sup>685</sup> In many

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<sup>681</sup> Benton, *An Artist in America*, 275.

<sup>682</sup> Baigell, *Thomas Hart Benton*, 55.

<sup>683</sup> Haskell, “Houn’ Dawg versus Art,” 231-232.

<sup>684</sup> Quoted in Pearson, *Goin’ to Kansas City*, 108. Pearson’s volume remains the most complete published oral history of Kansas City Jazz.

<sup>685</sup> The protracted migration of blacks to seek refuge from the South’s vicious Jim Crow legislation, violence urged by the increasingly powerful Ku Klux Klan, and economic malaise was accompanied by more specific events as well. The biggest came in the spring of 1927, when the worst flood in American history inundated 27,000 square miles of the Mississippi River Delta from Louisiana to Missouri, displacing some 200,000 blacks, many of whom moved to northern or Midwestern cities. See John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).

areas this district was highly subject to overcrowding, disease, and elevated poverty, but it was also home to a substantial middle-class black population who developed a robust commercial core along Eighteenth Street.<sup>686</sup> As this area and its environs became home to many machine-controlled cabarets, an economy of musical production emerged. With virtually no restrictions on hours or activities, proprietors looked to book live ensembles nearly every night of the week, giving the city's growing cohort of black musicians unmatched opportunities in which to sharpen their skills and develop their style.

Yet the story of Kansas City jazz goes beyond the story of vice. The same growing black population that had to bear the negative effects of the machine's unjust practices was also in large part a middle-class cohort intent on developing a network of social and entertainment institutions. Musicians flocking to Kansas City could certainly play gigs in infamous lower class cabarets like the Yellow Front, the Subway, and the Reno—venues that would become synonymous with the city's jazz innovations. Yet so too were there an increasing number of gigs entertaining middle-class black audiences in environments free of vice.<sup>687</sup> The middle class and elite demand for an increasingly circumscribed social scene meant that black social clubs, theaters, and dance halls became possible venues for both local bands and touring performers. During the '20s, Kansas City emerged as a primary stopping point on the western edge of the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA), a major black vaudeville circuit, as well as the tours of various barnstorming territory bands that crisscrossed the Southwest from home bases in cities like Dallas, Tulsa, Houston, and Oklahoma City.<sup>688</sup> These circuits were distinct in that they were not generally tied to the primary conduit of jazz migration that occurred when New Orleans players decamped to Chicago around the early 1920s. Free of an influx of Crescent City players, Kansas City would be able to nurture a unique sound.<sup>689</sup>

This overlapping of the worlds—of vice and respectability, of local talent and roaming ensembles—yielded an unmatched economy of musical borrowing, blending, and innovation that yielded a singular musical sound. Players' and bands' techniques and innovations rubbed off one each other, and musicians who had grown up hearing the Delta blues were often, by the prime of their careers, playing Kansas City style jazz by way of Oklahoma and Texas. It was not unusual for any given Kansas City musician in the 1920s or '30s to have been born in Louisiana or Mississippi, schooled and trained in Texas or Oklahoma as part of a territory band, and then drawn to Kansas City to seek financial and creative refuge in Pendergast's "Depression-proof" metropolis.<sup>690</sup> The vortex of musical innovation in Kansas City's urban core—housed in both dingy nightclubs like the Sunset (at Twelfth and the Paseo), the Reno (at Twelfth and Cherry), the Subway, and the Cherry Blossom (both at Eighteenth and Vine), as well as more respectable venues like the Paseo and Lincoln Theaters—played host over the years to a fusion of musical styles imported from Kansas City's vast hinterland.

The most quintessential was the blues.<sup>691</sup> Delta blues, of course, was a staple of jazz in all of its cradles, and was typically brought to Kansas City by solo blues shouters or duos who had moved from rural, agricultural areas. Yet Kansas City was also positioned to feel the impact of two other blues genres that were shuttled in via the Kansas City Southern Railway, a major belt line that ran southward across the Ozarks and into the heart of the southern pine forests of east Texas and western

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<sup>686</sup> Shortridge, *Kansas City and How It Grew*, 88-89.

<sup>687</sup> Marc Rice, "The Bennie Moten Orchestra 1918-1935: A Kansas City Jazz Ensemble and Its African-American Audience," (PhD dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1998), 169.

<sup>688</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 30-31, 62-83; Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 12-14, 53-73.

<sup>689</sup> Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 2-3.

<sup>690</sup> *Ibid.*, 53; Ross Russell, *Bird Lives!: The High Life and Hard Times of Charlie (Yardbird) Parker* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1996), 59.

<sup>691</sup> Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz, 1930-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 225.

Louisiana.<sup>692</sup> That logging country was known for the piano-blues styles of barrelhouse (characterized by its stomping, left-hand rhythms) and boogie-woogie (whose trademark was an unrelenting series of driving eighth-notes in the bass clef) that both developed in the brothels, barrooms, and honky-tonks clustered around the lumber camps whose yield was more often than not headed for the warehouses of Kansas City, then the nation's leading lumber distributor.<sup>693</sup>

As blues troubadours sang and played on the street corners and in the homes of Kansas City's black east side, pianists who played in cabarets and dance clubs incorporated their strains into accompaniments and arrangements.<sup>694</sup> This uptake of wailing, barrelhouse, and boogie-woogie blues from street to stage was assisted by the delivery of the blues into middle-class living rooms via recordings.<sup>695</sup> Winston Holmes, whose namesake music company at Eighteenth and Highland had secured the regional distribution rights for race labels, regularly filled the street scene with the wail of the blues blaring from a Victrola set up in front of his shop.<sup>696</sup> It was no wonder that bands working in the Southwest employed the twelve-bar blues more consistently than anywhere else in the country, completing the style's migration from the roaming, agricultural class of soloists or duos to the domain of the formal ensemble.<sup>697</sup>

Compared to the blues, ragtime was an influential style far closer to home. Cultivated in Missouri's second-tier cities of Sedalia, Joplin, and Carthage during the late nineteenth century, ragtime was defined by the infectious syncopating, or "ragging," of rhythms, usually at the hands of a solo pianist. The style became nearly synonymous with instant classics by Missourian Scott Joplin, whose "Maple Leaf Rag" (1899) and "The Entertainer" (1902) signified a unique regional genre unmatched in popularity and national influence. The infectious drive of ragtime was imported at the hands of pianists like Kansas City jazz pioneer Bennie Moten, who, despite the waning national popularity of ragtime after the emergence of jazz, still had an affinity for his region's indigenous popular music. So too did wind players; ragtime's popularity had catalyzed the transcription of piano pieces into orchestral arrangements that were performed frequently alongside cakewalks and marches throughout the hinterland, where nearly every community boasted a concert, brass, or marching band.<sup>698</sup>

Such ensembles were a final element of Kansas City's musical economy. A mainstay of Midwestern small town and big city life, community bands represented the most formalized musical tradition in the city, where brass bands were particularly prevalent. The impact was especially important in the black community. Lincoln High School, the city's African-American school located at Nineteenth and Tracy, boasted a monumental figure in Major N. Clark Smith, "America's Greatest Colored Bandmaster" who, according to bassist and pupil Walter Page, taught nearly every Kansas City musician.<sup>699</sup> At both Lincoln High and Western University, the city's historically black college, Smith established rigorous music programs that held students to the highest standards in both theory and technique. The straight-laced Smith was not a jazz man, but he encouraged his students to pursue

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<sup>692</sup> Pearson, "Political and Musical Forces that Influenced the Development of Kansas City Jazz," 188.

<sup>693</sup> For more description, see *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003) 2nd edition, s.v. "boogie-woogie" and "barrelhouse." See also "Industrial Statistics of Greater Kansas City," (Kansas City, MO: Chamber of Commerce, 1930).

<sup>694</sup> William Barlow, *"Looking Up At Down": The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 247.

<sup>695</sup> Schuller, *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 284.

<sup>696</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 34-35.

<sup>697</sup> Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 284.

<sup>698</sup> Pearson, "Political and Musical Forces that Influenced the Development of Kansas City Jazz," 183-186; Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 41-52; Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 281-282.

<sup>699</sup> Frank Driggs, "About My Life in Music by Walter Page, as Told to Frank Driggs," *The Jazz Review* (November 1958): 12-15.

music outside the classroom, with pupils such as Page taking his advice, and many others securing gigs in the city's jazz ensembles after graduating.<sup>700</sup>

The sultry cadence of the blues, the syncopation of ragtime, and the technical polish and rigor of brass band playing—these elements would converge and evolve in Kansas City's nightclubs, dance halls, and ballrooms during the mid-1920s to late-1930s to yield a definite musical flavor that infused the styles of countless orchestras playing in Kansas City and throughout its territory. Of the bands that began fusing these traditions, none exemplified the emergence of a singular Kansas City sound as sharply as the Bennie Moten Orchestra, the group that pioneered a series of innovations that would come to full stylistic maturity under the guidance of Count Basie in the late 1930s. (Figure 35) A pianist and bandleader, Moten was born in Kansas City in 1894 and honed his musical skills playing euphonium in a brass band and ragtime piano under the tutelage of two of Scott Joplin's former students. Moten formed his first ensemble in 1921, and by 1923, the group was recording for Okeh Records, an "independent" company whose strength was in "recordings by and for the race."<sup>701</sup>

In studio sessions and live performances, the Moten Orchestra proved that their style was in the process of development towards a definitive Kansas City idiom that diverged from Dixieland precedents. That much was clear from Moten's expansion and refining of instrumentation. He augmented cornet with trumpet, added alto saxophone and tuba, and eliminated banjo and clarinet solos that referenced the New Orleans tradition. Subsequent changes moved the sound even further away from Delta styles; Moten added electric guitar, expanded the wind sections for both a fuller sound and more technical polish in the upper registers, and swapped the cumbersome tuba for the limber string bass for more low register flexibility.<sup>702</sup> The new sound—still inflected with blues harmonies and set upon the syncopations of ragtime—was both more sonorous and pliable than the New Orleans idiom. In 1926, Moten signed his ensemble a deal with Victor Records, becoming the only band in the Southwest to hold a contract with a major label. Local professionals in Kansas City eagerly auditioned to fill the vacant spaces in the orchestra, now expanded to ten players.<sup>703</sup>



Figure 35: Bennie Moten's Kansas City Orchestra in 1927.  
LSC, UMKC

<sup>700</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 26-39.

<sup>701</sup> Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 89-90.

<sup>702</sup> *Ibid.*, 95-97.

<sup>703</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-99.

The music that was quickly developing into big band jazz, of course, was not jazz without two quintessential elements—improvisation and swing—and the development of Moten’s sound after 1926 and its uptake by the Count Basie Orchestra after Moten’s premature death in 1935 revealed the unique rendition of these elements in Kansas City. Swing is a notoriously difficult musical element to describe—something felt rather than heard by musicians and listeners alike.<sup>704</sup> Described by a musicologist as “a style of performance, an interrelation of rhythms, [an] enthusiasm for the act of playing, a freshness and spontaneity that could not be indicated by accents, note values or written symbols,” swing yields a relaxed sense of forward momentum—an unwavering sense of motion colored by a departure from strict meter and a reliance on the lilt of off-beats and syncopations.<sup>705</sup>

If swing was difficult to describe but impossible not to feel, then nearly everyone who made or experienced jazz in Kansas City felt that they tapped their feet, snapped their fingers, and moved their bodies differently there. Jazz legends who worked in Kansas City during its heyday—Mary Lou Williams, Jo Jones, and the king of them all, Count Basie—point out that that the pulse of Kansas City jazz betrayed a singular rhythmic metabolism. “Kansas City has a certain beat of music,” asserted Booker Washington, “and anybody [who] plays here knows that beat.”<sup>706</sup>

The new beat—a “relaxed, supple swing”—began to emerge in the mid-1920s as Walter Page and the Blue Devils, formed in 1925 from the talents of the disbanded Oklahoma City Blue Devils (the Southwest’s dominant territory band during the 1920s) offered a metric alternative to the rigid, ragtime influenced 2/4 numbers of the Bennie Moten Orchestra. The alternative came largely from the fingers of Kansas City native Walter Page, who by 1930 was playing the string bass in a style that broke free of the rudimentary doubling of the drums and piano to assume a more independent role of the “walking bass” line.

That change was part of a gradual reengineering of the jazz ensemble’s rhythmic engine in Kansas City’s clubs. Where the early ‘20s would have featured a quartet whose goal was to hold a steady pulse for the winds, changes during the late ‘20s and into the ‘30s ushered in the concept of the rhythm section as a sort of choir, with the piano, drums, and string bass assuming new degrees of autonomy. With the 4/4 walking bass providing the anchoring pulse, the piano was free to roam in a higher register and to distance itself from the regimented metric requirements that were a holdover from ragtime.<sup>707</sup> The drums also assumed a more melodic-linear role, propelling the music forward from bar to bar as the relaxed and swinging splash of the cymbal seemed to skip across the top of the texture like a smooth stone over water.

This development represented the birth of the modern jazz rhythm section—a group of players whose role was not simply rhythmic, but also melodic and harmonic. Players were unified in aim but individualistic in color—a balance that marked the evanescent quality of Kansas City’s

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<sup>704</sup> Gunther Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 223-225.

<sup>705</sup> Benny Goodman and Irving Kolodin, *The Kingdom of Swing* (New York: Frederic Ungar Publishing, 1939), 174; As Kansas City musician Jo Jones states, “Jazz has to swing,” but “there are some things you can’t describe . . . [and] swinging is one of them.” See Shaprio and Hentoff, eds., *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya*, 406-407. As Gunther Schuller notes, while swing’s acoustical framework is approached in many different ways, its yields a predictable and clear response: “a listener inadvertently starts tapping his foot, snapping his fingers, moving his body or head to the beat of the music.” See *The Swing Era*, 223.

<sup>706</sup> Quoted in Pearson, *Goin’ to Kansas City*, 115

<sup>707</sup> Contrast this with the emphasis by Bennie Moten on the left-hand. As piano great Mary Lou Williams remembers, Bennie Moten always started with his left hand, which, in combination with the drums and the string bass carried the number. That left hand foundation was so important in the style, that “if a pianist didn’t have a strong left hand [in Kansas City], well, he was not considered very good at all.” See Pearson, *Goin’ to Kansas City*, 115.

sound.<sup>708</sup> As Gunther Schuller points out, “the four beats of the guitar, [Alvin] Burrough’s flowing cymbal work, and the relaxed propulsion of [Walter] Page’s bass all combine to make a fluid, swinging beat that became the recognizable rhythmic trademark of the Kansas City style.”<sup>709</sup> That description refers to the sonic fusion that was perfected by the Count Basie Orchestra, which effectively replaced the Moten Orchestra after the bandleader’s 1935 death at age 40. As drummer Jo Jones recalls, “Bennie Moten’s band played a two-beat rhythm such as one-and-three... and Walter Page’s band played a two-and-four...and when those rhythms met in the [Count] Basie band there was an even flow— one, two, three, four—like a bouncing ball.”<sup>710</sup> This beat—described by Booker Washington as a 4/4 beat backsway—rooted in the feel and spirit of the Delta blues, was markedly different from the “two beat” style exemplified by the complex arrangements and passages of the other king of swing, New York-based bandleader Jimmie Lunceford. Kansas City, in other words, had developed a definitive swing with a singular feel.

If a singular swing was the rhythmic trademark of Kansas City Jazz, the use of riffs was the trademark of musical form.<sup>711</sup> Short, melodic phrases repeated over changing chord patterns, riffs originated in New Orleans, where black musicians had adapted the call-and-response patterns they knew from church services and sharecropper field hollers to fit the repeated refrains of the blues to produce the “riffs” of the city’s famous marching jazz.<sup>712</sup> When these so-called riffs were incorporated into Kansas City’s jazz, however, they performed the function of a formal device. Bennie Moten began incorporating riffs into the choruses of his orchestral jazz during the early to mid- 1920s, and the repetition within the chorus structure yielded a new sense of rhythmic momentum that pushed towards a distinctive style.

In Kansas City, riffs became a trademark device of both formal performance and improvisation. They began to undergird the melodies of soloists, and became as important for their melodic contours as for their rhythmic patterns. As pianist Jesse Stone recalls, riffs were in some ways a way of extending the forces of the rhythm section into the winds; it was “[w]hen we started transferring the rhythm[ic] power from the rhythm section into the brass and reed sections,” that the “change [to a Kansas City style] happened.”<sup>713</sup> These riffs were often as important as the solo improvisations. “Kansas City music,” remembers trumpet player Buck Clayton, is “where they set riffs behind you. No matter who’s playing a solo, the guys would get just as much kick out of setting a riff.”

The result was an unmistakable musical momentum. In practice, the first player to think of a riff would simply sound it, only for the others to play along, all underneath the improvisation of soloists. “That’s what used to make Kansas City music stand out,” Clayton reminisces. “It’s the solo playing and the moving background below it, and a strong rhythm section.” Bassist Gene Ramey was more colorful in his description, which paints the sonic scene as a battle of riffs in which the competing musical lines were unified by the motoric beat of Kansas City swing: it was “like an old-time revival ... and old camp meeting ... You hear the people shouting, you hear that in Basie’s band, you know. It’s just a happy-go-lucky thing. The trumpets are going one way, the saxophones another way, the trombones are still going a different way, and that rhythm section is just straight ahead.”<sup>714</sup>

Countless numbers played by bands during the late 1920s and early ‘30s expressed the emerging Kansas City style, but none did so as clearly and to such acclaim as “Moten Swing,” the *de*

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<sup>708</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 226-227.

<sup>709</sup> Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 298.

<sup>710</sup> Quoted in Shapiro and Hentoff, eds., *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya*, 298.

<sup>711</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 225.

<sup>712</sup> Schuller, *Early Jazz*, 27-28, 48.

<sup>713</sup> Quoted in Pearson, *Goin’ to Kansas City*, 116.

<sup>714</sup> Quoted in Pearson, *Goin’ to Kansas City*, 116.



*facto* “Kansas City Anthem” by guitarist and trombonist Eddie Durham.<sup>715</sup> A “riff holiday,” “Moten’s Swing” unfolded as a quintessential Kansas City number.<sup>716</sup> With a loose structure that was collectively improvised, the number was a “head arrangement”—a piece played not from sheet music but from memory. The staccato punctuation of riffs in brass and reeds, the driving rhythm that was sure and steady as a motor, and a loose structure whose chain of solo improvisations betrayed a free-swinging and often aggressive sense of musical freedom—these were the definitive sonic qualities of Kansas City jazz.<sup>717</sup>

If “Moten Swing” was a textbook example of Kansas City’s flavor of jazz, “Toby” offered an even more heated version. A piece structured around a riff series by Eddie Durham, “Toby” featured sections whose sheer volume of sound complemented rather than overpowered the walking bass of Walter Page. The “exacting balance,” writes a historian, revealed just how far Kansas City’s sound had come under Moten’s baton: “The sections ... seem to float on top of the rhythm instead of being caught up and flung about in its cross-currents, as was the case when the tuba and banjo were at cross-purposes with the piano and drums.”<sup>718</sup> (And such comments, while accurate, are only descriptive of the three-minute-long recording cuts. In reality, these are only snapshots of the protracted performances that unfolded in live venues.)

After Moten’s death, the Count Basie Orchestra continued the musical revolution. Basie, at any rate, had been at the musical helm of the orchestra for several years, and in his hands, the “swing machine” that was prophesied by the revolutions of Moten would achieve its apotheosis. Late ‘30s hits like “One O’Clock Jump,” “Jumpin’ at the Woodside,” and “Blues with Lips”—performed at Kansas City clubs like the Subway and the Reno, on tour in cities like Little Rock, Shreveport, and Waco, and in studios for a series of Decca recordings—further developed and disseminated the Kansas City style. They also justified the acknowledgement that the Basie band was considered to be the seminal guardian of the Kansas City sound. As the *Chicago News* admitted in 1936, “Basie has one of the most exciting bands in creation, possessing a rhythmic abandon that is non-existent north of their homes.”<sup>719</sup> By 1939, the ensemble was acknowledged as one of country’s two or three leading black bands, an honor that meant that the Kansas City jazz sound—barely audible fifteen years earlier—had gained a national profile. Trumpet player Booker Washington put it most succinctly, underscoring the reality that the art had become a shorthand for its crucible: “If you hear [Count] Basie, you hear Kansas City.”<sup>720</sup>

If the centripetal energy of Kansas City’s jazz clubs drew musicians and their ideas together, then those ideas were shuttled back out into the hinterland when bands toured and played in smaller cities where dancing had become popular but where permanent orchestras were financially out of reach. As the capital of musical activity and innovation in the Southwest, Kansas City nurtured many of the best known of the territory bands during the Roaring Twenties. With a series of new federal highways and buses of unprecedented comfort at their disposal, bands including the Bennie Moten Orchestra, Andy Kirk and His Twelve Clouds of Joy, the Jess Stone Orchestra, and the Paul Banks Orchestra could journey to places like Little Rock and Fayetteville, Arkansas, Shreveport, Louisiana, and Muskogee, Oklahoma, to give dance-hungry locals—both black and white—a chance to hear the live sounds of Kansas City swing.<sup>721</sup> These bands also served as traveling conservatories and training

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<sup>715</sup> David Oliphant, *Texan Jazz* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 104.

<sup>716</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 117-119; Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 108.

<sup>717</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 117-119.

<sup>718</sup> Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 107.

<sup>719</sup> Quoted, in “Count Basie is Big Hit in Chicago,” *Kansas City Call* (December 4, 1936), 9.

<sup>720</sup> Quoted in Pearson, *Goin’ to Kansas City*, 115.

<sup>721</sup> Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 113-119.

organizations that were exposed young musicians in tucked away places of the hinterland the latest in musical innovations.<sup>722</sup>

The Depression all but halted this diffusion of innovation as touring slowed and record sales plummeted.<sup>723</sup> Yet in Pendergast's Kansas City, opportunities for gigs were uncommonly good—even enhanced by the onset of the economic downturn. The boss's political connections and support for FDR had made Kansas City the recipient of the majority of Missouri's federal relief money, just as the Ten-Year Plan was pumping \$2 million worth of wages into the pockets of the city's white working classes—arguably the largest group of jazz club patrons. With home rule granted to the Kansas City Police Department in 1932—a move that effectively gave cabaret owners the freedom to ignore closing laws—the conditions were ripe for optimal musical activity.<sup>724</sup> Musicians from across the hinterland flocked to Kansas City to secure work in the '30's most incendiary crucible.

The production and innovation of Kansas City jazz, as a result, would only intensify as the decade rolled on. Many ensembles doubled down in their creative activity in the absence of a touring economy, and as musicians from less economically robust cities and towns moved to Kansas City looking for work, the atmosphere of competition and innovation only became more energetic. By the mid-1930s, when tours and recording recommenced, ensembles like the Count Basie Orchestra, Harlan Leonard and His Rockets, and the Jay McShann Orchestra proved that, in addition to its relative prosperity, Pendergast's Kansas City was also marked by its pervasive and fearless musical innovation. On clear nights with favorable atmospheric conditions, W9XBY's 1,000-watt signal (which normally covered only the Kansas City metro area) could broadcast the sounds of the Count Basie Orchestra from the Reno Club—the infamous “House of Swing” at Twelfth and Cherry—to listeners in Denver, Dallas, and as far north as Canada.<sup>725</sup>

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The sustained success of Kansas City's jazz scene translated into a striking concentration of musicians, and big numbers of musicians in Kansas City made for a unique atmosphere of intense camaraderie and collaboration. As bandleader Sam Price remembers, “I think the thing that fascinated me so about the town was that everybody was so friendly, everybody would eat, almost at the same time. . . . You'd have thirty, forty musicians eating at the same time . . . in a restaurant . . . before they went to work.” The abundance and concentration seemed to translate into mutual care among musicians. In Kansas City, “you didn't make a lot of money, but everybody took care of everybody, and you had one helluva time.”<sup>726</sup> In contrast to the cutthroat atmosphere of the bigger cities, Kansas City maintained a small-town sense of friendliness. As Jo Jones recalls after arriving in New York, the Big Apple afforded “everything contained in Kansas City, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, or anywhere, but we had in Kansas City an unselfishness you don't find here. We were more concerned with our fellow man and with music.”<sup>727</sup>

If this atmosphere of camaraderie was essential for musical innovation, the competition that resulted from large numbers of musicians vying for gigs was uncommonly intense. The artistic warfare was embodied in the format of the jam session, a key element of Kansas City jazz that made for a

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<sup>722</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 770-773.

<sup>723</sup> Sales of records nationwide plummeted from a high of 104 million in 1927 to 6 million in 1932. See Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 109-110.

<sup>724</sup> Brown and Dorsett, *K. C.*, 196-200; Schirmer, *A City Divided*, 166-167.

<sup>725</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 136.

<sup>726</sup> Quoted in Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City*, 112.

<sup>727</sup> Quoted in Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' to Ya*, 312.

unique atmosphere of innovation. (Figure 36) The concept was simple: “a foregathering of jazzmen to engage in a musical free-for-all,” a jam session was essentially a protracted improvisation contest—a continuous number during which musicians could attempt to outplay one another. A band would usually begin by playing a standard, and any musicians who wanted could improvise along with the band in a type of musical combat that could go on for hours at a time. While these “cutting-contests” were standard fare in other hotbeds of jazz, in Kansas City they reached a new level of competitiveness and enthusiasm.

So widespread were these battles that venues were categorized into the quality and virtuosity of their sessions, with pickup sessions led by teenagers at places like the Old Kentucky Bar-B-Que differing markedly from the no-nonsense, high-octane affairs at venues like the Sunset, Subway, and Reno clubs.<sup>728</sup> By most accounts, Kansas City’s jam sessions and cutting contests were far longer and more intense than those in Chicago or New York. “There wasn’t nothing but jamming then,” remembers saxophonist Buster Smith, noting that nearly every ensemble in Kansas City would host jam sessions, either after the regular shows had finished or when musicians were itching to engage in musical combat.<sup>729</sup> “They used to have jam sessions like they were gunfighters,” recalls Buck Clayton. “Lips Page used to go around and write notes, and find out where this trumpet player’s living, and slip a note under his [door] ... ‘Meet me tonight at such and such club.’”<sup>730</sup>



Figure 36: Jam sessions were rarely (if ever) photographed, but this 1955 reenactment offers a reconstructed scene of a typical Kansas City cutting session.

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At face value, Kansas City’s jam sessions were astounding for their length. With its all-night, full-bore mentality and abundance of talent flowing in from nearly every direction, the city boasted ideal conditions for the most relentless cutting sessions in the history of the form. Trumpet player Buck Clayton remembers how sessions would seem to draw seemingly endless numbers of musicians

<sup>728</sup> Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 25.

<sup>729</sup> Quoted in Pearson, *Goin’ to Kansas City*, 118-119.

<sup>730</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 110.

who “all want to cut you.” “[I]rumpet players looked like they came from behind the walls, they came from under the rug.”<sup>731</sup> The ensuing battles between tens of players stretched on endlessly as each tried to outdo the band’s lead players.

As the motors of the musical machine, members of the rhythm section were the most astute observers of the longevity of these sessions. As pianist Sammy Price recalls, “I remember one night I went in the Subway about nine-thirty, Hot Lips Page was playing “Am I Blue?” ... I stayed there ... till about twelve or one o’clock. ... I went home and came back a couple of hours later. They were still playing the same song.”<sup>732</sup> Price’s most epic jam session unfolded one morning at the Subway, the city’s prime jam session venue that Mary Lou Williams called a “groovy firetrap,” where two visiting drummers with the necessary drive, aggression, and skill challenged the seasoned pianist in a rendition of the 1928 Tin Pan Alley hit “Nagasaki.” In all, Price played one hundred and eleven choruses of the song, with one solo lasting an hour and fifteen minutes.<sup>733</sup>

Kansas City’s jam sessions were where the gears of musical innovation turned, grinded, and on occasion, meshed. Musicians might not have been paid for these engagements, but they were afforded a canvas unstained by that pressure of soliciting crowds and club owners, commercial interests, and the pressures of time. In the heat of competition, they could push their musical abilities and impulses to the limits of acceptability.<sup>734</sup> In the most high-pressure venues, the true jam session was never a showcase of prosaic ability or even standard virtuosity. As music producer Ross Russell points out, “what counted were fresh musical ideas...the ability to run interesting new changes against the standard harmonic pattern, to spin fresh melodies and to control the complicated rhythmic patterns that generate that mysterious ingredient of jazz known as ‘swing.’” The best competitors—those who could reliably “cut heads”—were “adept at taking another man’s ideas, often his best ones, and turning them inside out, or using them as a basis for a new set of improvisations.”<sup>735</sup> These demands, ramped up to extremes in Kansas City’s nightclubs, made jam sessions no less virtuosic than the improvisations of the Baroque era’s great organists or the likes of Romantic-era violinists like Paganini. They also ensured that the full-throated playing and unending solo battles were the clearest expression of a jazz style that was—in contrast to the more studious, controlled, and complex styles of New York and Chicago—as incendiary, rambunctious, and freewheeling as the urban environment that engendered it. “I never heard music that had the kind of feeling ... until I went into Kansas City in November, 1933,” remembers Jo Jones. “I don’t know why the feeling at jam sessions is different in New York from the way it was in Kansas City. But it was.”<sup>736</sup>

Jam sessions at the most esteemed venues were unforgiving for even the most promising young musicians, even those whose youthful enthusiasm had not yet fully transferred to their fingers and lips. When a young and inexperienced Charlie Parker attempted to show off at the Reno, a high ranking venue in the jam session hierarchy, his two choruses quickly lapsed into silence as he grew nervous and unable to keep pace with the relentless tempo set by the rhythm section. Breaking the silence was the sound of Jo Jones’ cymbal, thrown by the drummer at Parker’s feet in a gesture of disapproval. Catcalls and laughter accompanied the young saxophonist’s exit, after which he told his close friend, Gene Ramey, “Don’t worry, I’ll be back. I’ll fix these cats. Everybody’s laughing at me now, but just wait and see.”<sup>737</sup> Parker, of course, was right; he would become the most famous

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<sup>731</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 118.

<sup>732</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 117.

<sup>733</sup> Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 17, 28; Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya*, 309.

<sup>734</sup> See Rice, “The Bennie Moten Orchestra,” 187.

<sup>735</sup> Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 26.

<sup>736</sup> Quoted in Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin’ to Ya*, 312.

<sup>737</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 165-166; Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 28.

saxophone player to come out of Kansas City. Yet while his eventual success would make him an icon of Kansas City's jam sessions, many other young musicians were not so fortunate in their attempts to survive the city's cutthroat musical atmosphere.

The longevity of Kansas City's jam sessions had a powerful centripetal effect. With sessions often lasting hours, there was ample time for word to travel through the musicians' grapevine, and for eager musicians to show up ready to jump in. Mary Lou Williams recalls that musicians from as far as Kansas City, Kansas—some three miles away—would walk, instruments in hand, to the clubs around Eighteenth and Vine if they caught word of a quality jam session. "Even bass players, caught without streetcar fare, would hump their bass on their back and come running."<sup>738</sup> Traveling bands, too, were known to engage in the fun. Groups that were passing through Kansas City to other cities would often stop, even in the middle of the night, only to wake up local musicians and drag them down to clubs for jams.<sup>739</sup>

No one, however, was more caught up in the pull of jams than the rhythm players, who were in high demand yet never afforded the breaks enjoyed by the competing players of winds and reeds. Drummers suffered from intense physical fatigue, and pianists and especially bassists from chafed and bloody fingers. As saxophonist Herman Walder remembers, "I've seen Big [Walter] Page ... play so long one night ... [that] his bass just crumbled, looked like toothpicks."<sup>740</sup> Many rhythm players, however, switched out during the course of the session. Sammy Price and Mary Lou Williams both recall being summoned in the early hours of the morning to relieve exhausted pianists caught in the frenzy of sound.<sup>741</sup> In early 1934, just after the repeal of Prohibition, Williams was summoned from sleep at four in the morning by saxophonist Ben Webster, who reported that an unexpected session at the Cherry Blossom had pulled a visiting saxophonist in deeper than he expected. "Sure enough, when we got there, Hawkins was in his singlet, taking turns with the Kaycee men. It seems he had run into something he didn't expect."<sup>742</sup>

What had caught Webster off guard was commonplace to Kansas City's musicians, many of whom viewed cutting sessions as a strangely nurturing. "Those sessions were held for the joy of playing," recalls Jo Jones. "[G]uys would just be trying to show ... how they had improved. ... and when they had found something new they would bring it up to the session." Collaboration in a framework of competition, then, was the name of the game. "The idea of the jam session then wasn't who could play better than somebody else—it was a matter of contributing something and of experimentation."<sup>743</sup> Based on accounts of the intensity and length of these sessions, Jones retrospective is likely sugar coated. Yet it nonetheless underscores the fact that, despite their ruthless and even masochistic nature, jam sessions were about innovation and personal improvement as much as they were about competition. "[Y]ou got the chance to play with the best," recounts drummer Ernest Daniels. "[B]y playing with the best some of that rubs off on you."<sup>744</sup>

The jam session and its close cousin, the "spook breakfast," were evidence that Kansas City jazz was as much a social culture as a musical style. Spook breakfasts were the creation of Count Basie, who modeled them on an event he had experienced in his Harlem years during the early 1920s. Famously held at the Reno Club, the black-only engagements began at 4am on Mondays as musical

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<sup>738</sup> Quoted in Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya*, 285.

<sup>739</sup> See Jo Jones, interview in Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya*, 284; cited in Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City*, 28.

<sup>740</sup> Quoted in Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City*, 117-118.

<sup>741</sup> Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City*, 27.

<sup>742</sup> Quoted in Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya*, 292.

<sup>743</sup> Quoted in Shapiro and Hentoff, *Hear Me Talkin' To Ya*, 293.

<sup>744</sup> Quoted in Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City*, 118.

competitions and parties that extended into the afternoon.<sup>745</sup> Trumpeter Richard Smith recalled the scene with striking detail. Patrons elbowed their way into a “musty, smoke-hazed room, squeezing past the hustlers, grifters, solicitors and off-duty musicians” to find seats close to the bandstand. Musicians not on stage would be lined up against the north wall, “almost popping out of that back door next to the unfenced dirt yard.” On particularly heavy nights, the back alley served as an overflow room. “The repartee between those on both sides of that back door was often more entertaining than the floor show on the inside. Drinks purchased by the bandmen could be shuttled through the door at half price. Some outside purchases would sometimes meet with disaster on the return trip by falling into the hands of “Big Un,” who would down it with one gulp, throw the glass out the door and tell the luckless buyer to “Go to Hell.”” Such backdoor transactions, including sales of “liver, pig snoots and ears, hog maws, fish, chicken and pork tenderloins” from John Agno’s lunch wagon parked near the alley outside, meant that there was “sometimes more business transacted through the back end of the Reno Club than through the front door.”<sup>746</sup>

Such back alley transactions more often involved recreational drugs. For many musicians, late shows and all-night jam sessions meant intense focus, and intense focus meant marijuana. Pot was nothing new for musicians, of course, but in Kansas City, where Pendergast’s rule of law translated into few restrictions on any substance, players were all the more keen to light up. “[Pot] is the only thing they lived for I think, some of ‘em in those days,” says John Tumino, recalling how Charlie Parker would frequently pawn his saxophone for drug money. “Everybody grew pot in the backyard in Kansas City,” and unlike in Chicago or New York, marijuana plants grew abundantly in the lush river bottoms in close proximity to Kansas City’s nightlife district.<sup>747</sup> “I remember in Kansas City,” recalls Gene Ramey, “the guys used to go down to the river ... after they got off work ... The weeds would be about this tall [a man’s height].”<sup>748</sup>

Many, of course, did not wait until they were off duty. Clubs like the Hey-Hay were known to sell joints alongside shots of whiskey—both priced at around twenty-five cents.<sup>749</sup> At the Reno, the same back patio that was overflow space during spook breakfasts was where musicians would go during their ten-minute breaks to buy “sticks of shit” from a supplier called the “Old Lady.” Twenty-five cents would buy three joints, while three to five dollars would fetch a Prince Albert tobacco can of loose marijuana.<sup>750</sup> Band members would smoke freely during the show, the blue smoke wafting up towards the small balcony where jazz enthusiasts and the literati were known to savor the city’s most distinguished jazz along with a second-hand high, all while feeling the beats of the rhythm section through the framing of the building.<sup>751</sup> Critic and producer John Hammond, the man responsible for discovering Count Basie and stealing him away to New York, remembers his first experience in the Reno: “I noticed an open window behind the bandstand at which occasional transactions took place; I assumed that ‘tea’ was being passed.” For Hammond, the pot was not merely a stage prop: Basie

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<sup>745</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 8, 136-137.

<sup>746</sup> Richard J. Smith, “Jazz Festival Tonight: The Reno Club Reunion,” *Star Sunday Magazine of the Kansas City Star* (April 29, 1973), 10-14; Quoted in Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 137-138.

<sup>747</sup> Quoted in Pearson, *Goin’ to Kansas City*, 106.

<sup>748</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 105.

<sup>749</sup> John Alberton, “Stories of Uncle Milty Live On,” *Jazz Ambassador Magazine* (October/November 1992): 17, cited in Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 7.

<sup>750</sup> Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 24.

<sup>751</sup> Ross Russell cites interviews with Jesse Price and Richard Dickert, see *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, 24.

“was still the best band I had ever heard, and without that kind of stimulus they couldn’t have done it.”<sup>752</sup>

If pot was the drug of choice, nutmeg was the most unusual. Thrown back in large doses, often with caffeinated beverages and prescription pills, the spice could induce hallucinogenic effects that edged toward delirium. “This is the craziest thing I ever saw,” remembers John Tumino. “[T]hey did Coca-Cola and nutmeg and aspirin.”<sup>753</sup> Trumpeter Orville “Piggy” Minor even recalls when Charlie Parker introduced nutmeg to his band: “He went to the store and got the nutmeg ... opened it, and he gets Pepsi-Cola. You have to have Pepsi-Cola or else, won’t nothing happen. He takes the nutmeg, puts it on his tongue, and you hold your breath because if you don’t you’ll choke. So he gets the Pepsi-Cola and a half hour from that, you don’t know a thing. ... He feels like he’s on a sidewalk and it’s a long step down.”<sup>754</sup>

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If Kansas City’s black musicians had expansive creative freedoms, the conditions of their work was another story. While the mobsters and machine cronies of Kansas City maintained the country’s most jazz-friendly infrastructure, most viewed the city’s musicians and their sounds simply as means to an end. Like the patrons that flowed into the city’s clubs, owners had various levels of appreciation and understanding of the music they were hearing, as well as various levels of respect for the musicians that guaranteed the success of their venues. Above all, however, they saw jazz’s value in its ability to draw customers in, get them to buy drinks, dance the night away, and—in an ideal scenario—return the following night. For many, club-owning mobsters treated players “on par with bar stools and pianos,” viewing them as little more than necessary props in the lucrative nightlife machine. Some musicians even sought physical protection. Abie Price, bandleader at the Hawaiian Gardens, purchased a handgun, eventually shooting off several of his toes (and ending his career) in an accidental discharge.<sup>755</sup>

Such scenarios did not mean that there were not kind and generous club owners, even if their respect was more paternalistic than mutual. “Those gangsters would always treat everybody right,” remembers Eddie Durham. “If you touched a musician, or one of the girls, you’d go out on your head. Nobody ever harassed musicians.” Pay, too, seemed fair for some. “Those guys paid you double for anything you ever done in Kansas City,” Durham recalls. “They never owed a musician a nickel.”<sup>756</sup> A handful of owners even became recognized as saints for the increasingly desperate community of black musicians. Piney Brown, owner of the Subway, was known to be a gangster, a gambler, and probably a pimp too, but he also regularly doled out food, drinks, and extra money to struggling musicians. “I don’t think he made any money off the Subway,” remembers one player, “because he gave away too much. ... When you went down there to play, you could go down there any night and get juiced and eat and do whatever you wanted to do. If you came there as a musician it never cost you anything.”<sup>757</sup>

To say that club owners had the upper hand in terms of hiring and firing musicians did not mean that jazz players were powerless. One of the main features of Kansas City’s jazz landscape, after

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<sup>752</sup> Quoted in Pearson, *Goin’ to Kansas City*, 106. John Hammond, *John Hammond on Record* (New York: Ridge Press-Summit Books, 1977), 170, quoted in Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 145.

<sup>753</sup> Quoted in Pearson, *Goin’ to Kansas City*, 105.

<sup>754</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 174.

<sup>755</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 116. See also Pearson, *Goin’ to Kansas City*, 93.

<sup>756</sup> Quoted in Pearson, *Goin’ to Kansas City*, 94.

<sup>757</sup> Quoted in Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 131.

all, was the Musicians Local No. 627, one of the nation's few black unions associated with the American Federation of Musicians. Founded in 1917, the "Colored Musicians Union" served as a social organization, a clearinghouse for gigs, and a first-contact for complaints against unjust practices by booking agents and band leaders. Spawning several bands in the early 1920s, the union benefitted from the Lincoln Theater's membership in the TOBA, the vaudeville circuit that brought a steady flow of musicians through the Eighteenth and Vine District, where many decided to stay.<sup>758</sup> The rise of territorial bands during the late 1920s grew the union's membership even more, as did the onset of Depression that sent many musicians flocking to Kansas City.

Between 1927 and 1928, the union's membership increased from 87 to over 300, a result of increasing leverage. "Negro musicians who had in the past been forced to go to larger cities in order to early a living are staying at home and doing well," remarked the *Kansas City Call*, the city's black newspaper.<sup>759</sup> In 1930, the organization moved from the Rialto Building at Eighteenth and Highland to a renovated apartment building nearby at 1823 Highland, just around the block from the Eighteenth and Vine intersection. The Union's power also translated into popular events for the black community, including an annual "Battle of the Bands" and "Musicians Ball" that featured the city's finest house ensembles, including the Bennie Moten Orchestra, Andrew Kirk and His Twelve Clouds of Joy, and Walter Page's Blue Devils. If the jam session was the provenance of the lower-class cabaret, the "battle of the bands" was a far more refined affair. These competitive exhibitions had become a fixture of the Kansas City music scene in 1926, and became increasingly formalized as the Bennie Moten became more famous. Challengers included the increasingly talented Kansas City bands as well as out-of-town ensembles from St. Louis and Omaha.<sup>760</sup> The first annual Musicians' Ball filled the Paseo Hall with 2,200 dancers.<sup>761</sup>

Such events underscored the reality that lower-class cabarets were not Kansas City's only crucibles of jazz. Bigger, more formal venues, after all, offered bands solid booking opportunities, good pay, and big audiences—key elements for ensemble cohesion and optimal musical output. Individual members of the Bennie Moten Orchestra band certainly honed and expanded their skill sets by playing in jams sessions at lower-class venues like the Subway and the Yellow Front, but their main livelihood was playing for the middle- and upper-middle classes of black society at venues like the Labor Temple, Paseo Hall, Liberty Park (a city-owned park that blacks could patronize), and Fairyland Park, where they performed for social groups, charities, and political rallies.<sup>762</sup> As the ensemble raised their profile among whites through recordings, it began to book lucrative gigs at white venues like the El Torreón Ballroom and the Pla-Mor, giving them an economic stability that few other bands could match.<sup>763</sup>

At the Pla-Mor, the city's (and one of America's) largest entertainment complexes, bands had the opportunity to accompany the faddish walk-a-thons (less commonly but more accurately called "dance marathons") that had exploded as popular and cheap entertainment in 1930s. (Figure 37) Pianist Jay "Hootie" McShann, leader of the last great Kansas City big band, recalls one such gig in 1938 that lasted several months. Taking the stage in the middle of the afternoon, the band would play

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<sup>758</sup> The elegant Lincoln Theater opened in 1920 to serve "that large and ever-increasing number of our racial group who bitterly resent the discrimination of Jim-Crowism practiced at down-town theatres and who from a standpoint of refinement, culture and intelligence deserve an amusement place in keeping with the advancement of the race." See *Kansas City Sun* (February 21, 1920).

<sup>759</sup> "300 Members are in Union of Musicians," *Kansas City Call* (September 14, 1928).

<sup>760</sup> Rice, "The Bennie Moten Orchestra," 199.

<sup>761</sup> "First Annual Musicians Ball Draws Great Crowd," *Kansas City Call* (December 6, 1929).

<sup>762</sup> Rice, "The Bennie Moten Orchestra," 185.

<sup>763</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.



through the night into the early hours of the morning, all the while accompanying the hundreds of dance couples engaged in masochistic tests of endurance and showmanship. Trumpeter Buddy Anderson recalls the electric nature of the scene, as hundreds of viewers would crowd the arena to witness the nightly spectacle: “Big crowd in the arena, every night packed, and doing all the dances, [dancers] stragglin’, they’d be resting, but evening comes, everybody came alive again.”<sup>764</sup> This period of steady, well-paid work allowed the band to solidify their reputation, retain members, and acquire a repertoire of some seven hundred head arrangements and two-hundred and fifty written arrangements.<sup>765</sup> The longest head arrangements—unnotated pieces played from memory and learned by ear—were what McShann and others called “skull-busters.”<sup>766</sup> Lasting some thirty minutes, these pieces were the result of long-winded performance gigs where lively, steady music was obligatory.

Fairyland amusement park was an equally solid booking (at least during the summer). The Jay McShann Orchestra secured the gig as the house band in 1938, and played every weeknight, alternating Friday and Saturday nights with visiting bands.<sup>767</sup> The solid pay and steady work offered by these venues was golden for bands who had felt the pressures of low pay and erratic and unreliable gigs elsewhere, which often resulted in an impulse to disband.<sup>768</sup> “Gigs like that are the backbone of a band’s staying together,” claims trumpeter Buddy Anderson. “[Y]ou have to have some dough to hold the cats together.”<sup>769</sup> The resulting cohesion led the McShann Orchestra to attract some of the top young talents, including saxophone dynamo Charlie Parker, who was drawn to the group because of its solid wages.



Figure 37: Don Redman and His Orchestra on the stage of the Pla-Mor in the 1930s.  
*LSC, UMKC*

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<sup>764</sup> Quoted in Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City*, 170.

<sup>765</sup> Jay McShann, interview by Nathan Pearson and Howard Litwak, April 28, 1977, transcript, folder 17, 59; Kansas City Jazz Oral History Collection (K0012); SHSMO-KC; *Kansas City Star* (February 7, 1986), quoted in Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City*, 171.

<sup>766</sup> Jay McShann, interview by Nathan Pearson and Howard Litwak, April 28, 1977, transcript, folder 17, 81-82.; Kansas City Jazz Oral History Collection (K0012); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>767</sup> Jay McShann, interview by Nathan Pearson and Howard Litwak, April 28, 1977, transcript, folder 17, 59-65; Kansas City Jazz Oral History Collection (K0012); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>768</sup> See Bernard “Buddy” Anderson, interview by Nathan Pearson and Howard Litwak, May 25, 1977, transcript, folder 15, 119; Kansas City Jazz Oral History Collection (K0012); SHSMO-KC.

<sup>769</sup> Quoted in Pearson, *Goin' to Kansas City*, 171.

If true artistic innovation is characterized by struggle and uncertain acceptance, then the jazz economy of Kansas City exposed the ways in which artists and their music were cornered by shifting moral and political conditions. Kansas City was a bright spot for musicians eager to up their musical game or earn money for their talents, but the enthusiasm for the jazz and nightlife industry varied for the diverse residents of Kansas City's black district.

Unsurprisingly, the biggest proponents were cabaret proprietors who were allied with the machine. Men like Felix Payne, the black owner of the Subway and Sunset Clubs, pushed for the continuation of the machine's rule and supported the Democratic organization, which had, since 1925, gradually eaten into the Republican majority of the city's black neighborhoods. Seeing the links between machine power and the economic success of the area's nightclubs and restaurants, men like Payne were eager to continue the neighborhood's push towards a Democratic majority. Payne was even known to pay people to vote for the machine, and to shuttle voters to multiple polling stations.<sup>770</sup>

Yet not all were so enthusiastic about the jazz coming out of the cabarets or of the machine that buttressed the whole system. Some of course, had the perspective that jazz exemplified the new culture of moral laxity that characterized the 1920s. Many, however, viewed matters through the narrower prism of Kansas City politics. Professionals and middle-class blacks, along with many of the black elites, were outright disdainful of the apparatus that they saw as putting a dangerous stranglehold on the livelihood of their area of the city, which was being increasingly squeezed by the simultaneous influx of newcomers as well as the mounting racist real estate practices of middle-class whites that refused to allow for expansion. "Because Negroes have the least financial and political weight," wrote a journalist in *The Call*, "ties between the police and the racketeers endanger us most of all." "Our residence district ... suffers the contamination of white vice resorts."<sup>771</sup>

The paper was also insistent that the cabarets did not epitomize the black neighborhoods, and that the vote for Democratic candidates did not reflect the white misperception that blacks were more accepting and welcoming of vice. After one local paper quoted white politicians as stating that "Negroes voted for the protection of their crap games and night life on Twelfth and Eighteenth Streets," *The Call* was quick to retort: "Even the fertile imagination of the reporter who wrote that twaddle would hardly charge the women who handle family finances and the host of church members with voting 'to protect crap games.' ... Their operators and their customers are too few to effect [*sic*] the thousands of Negro voters."<sup>772</sup> Indeed, while jazz and its support structure of vice was undoubtedly a unique feature of Kansas City's black life, it was by no means a dominant feature of the everyday experience of most black families.<sup>773</sup> Most blacks, in fact, had shifted from supporting Republicans to supporting Democrats because of the GOP's elevated level of police brutality towards blacks and its courting of KKK endorsements beginning in 1922.<sup>774</sup> The GOP's percentage of the black vote fell from 59 percent to 30 percent between 1926 and 1932, and by 1938 blacks in Kansas City voted for the Democrats by a four-to-one margin.<sup>775</sup>

The Pendergast machine might have been preferable to Republican control, but it still sustained a landscape that was riddled with injustices and that essentially held blacks hostage to white

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<sup>770</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>771</sup> "Killing the Graft," *Kansas City Call* (January 10, 1930): 11.

<sup>772</sup> "Analysis of Vote Figures Shows Vice Had Little Effect on Negro Ballots," *Kansas City Call* (March 28, 1930), 1.

<sup>773</sup> Charles E. Coulter, *Take Up the Black Man's Burden: Kansas City's African-American Communities, 1865-1939* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 217-218.

<sup>774</sup> Schirmer, *A City Divided*, 152-160.

<sup>775</sup> Ibid., 154.

preferences. Vice venues doubtless catalyzed an influx of criminal activity in the black commercial core, and in Pendergast's Kansas City, policemen often selectively overlooked infractions in white areas like Thirteenth and Baltimore while coming down harder on the black-dominated areas.<sup>776</sup> Pendergast always posed as a man dedicated to bettering the lives of black supporters, yet his promises usually came up short. When the boss proposed a score of new facilities as part of the New Deal and the Ten-Year Plan, few of them were built as planned, just as the machine honored the union rules and color lines that further eroded black power during the Depression.<sup>777</sup>

Jazz, then, was a remarkable product of innovation produced under despicable circumstances. And like so many other elements of the unique moral economy that flavored Interwar Kansas City, it stood firmly in the domain of paradox and contradiction. Disapproval of jazz, after all, was expressed everywhere in the 1920s and '30s, and by both blacks and whites. Yet black churches had an especially strong voice given that the music was perceived not only as morally questionable but also as a vehicle of white misperceptions about black culture.<sup>778</sup> "Every morning the rev would get up in there in that pulpit and preach his ass off about it," remembered Buddy Anderson. "That derved music." But black life in Kansas City was much like white life—riddled with contradiction and deep down unmoved by charges of double standards. After all, what happened on Sunday was often exclusive of the rest of the week. "[I]he church and professional people were still in the bag where ... it was sin music and that was just it, [even though] ... they all had some records at home."<sup>779</sup>

### *The Unravelling*

Kansas City Jazz got its Carnegie Hall debut on December 23, 1938, when a capacity crowd packed the venue for a kaleidoscopic program titled "Spirituals to Swing: An Evening of American Negro Music." After hearing strains of blues, Dixieland jazz, boogie woogie, and gospel, the audience was treated for the entire second half of the three-and-a-half-hour program to the talents of the Count Basie Orchestra, recently recruited to the New York scene by talent scout and record producer John Hammond. Basie's offerings constituted what the *New York Times* review called "swing without adjectives," a genre so raucous and engaging that the same reviewer wondered if the stage manager thought "the walls would come tumbling down."<sup>780</sup> That energy would seem to catapult the band towards the top of the charts in the weeks following the concert. Placing fourth in the January 1939 ranking of best swing bands in *Down Beat*, the Basie Band proved that the style born in the smoky nightclubs of Pendergast's core had finally gained a national following.<sup>781</sup>

If the success of Kansas City jazz seemed to verify the longevity of the city's triumphant Interwar spirit—the sense that it was, as two historians wrote in 1950, a "city of the future ... dressed in the fabric of its dreams"—a cover-page article in the *Kansas City Star* by Missouri Governor Lloyd

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<sup>776</sup> See Edmund D. Smith, *Reform Oral History Collection*, Kansas City, Missouri, June 10, 1988, cited in Rice, 174-175.

<sup>777</sup> Schirmer, *A City Divided*, 165-166.

<sup>778</sup> The dean of the School of Fine Arts at the University of Kansas, for instance, lambasted jazz as "the animal side of music," something that "originated in the dancing dives of the South" and was "nothing but syncopated rhythm" that "been the biggest cause of the undesirable dances which have been so prevalent of late." Quoted in Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 75-76. The University of Kansas, in contrast to the University of Missouri, admitted black students during the 1920s.

<sup>779</sup> Bernard "Buddy" Anderson, interview by Nathan Pearson and Howard Litwak, May 25, 1977, transcript, folder 15, 87-88, Kansas City Jazz Oral History Collection (K0012); SHSMO, KC.

<sup>780</sup> Howard H. Taubman, "Negro Music Given at Carnegie Hall," *New York Times* (December 24, 1938), 13.

<sup>781</sup> Driggs and Haddix, 180-181; Russell, 143.

Stark on the morning of the Carnegie Hall concert suggested a more tenuous situation.<sup>782</sup> In damning prose, the “severe and humorless” Democratic governor officiously called for a no-holds-barred movement to oust Pendergast, dismantle his political architecture, and dissolve the physical and symbolic landscape of vice and corruption.<sup>783</sup> Pendergast might have helped usher Stark to power, but with national journalists laying bare the Kansas City’s rampant legal violations, and officials like city manager Henry McElroy openly characterizing Kansas City as “a machine or gang town, run by the organization of Tom Pendergast,” with a sin-soaked nightlife that was generated by “public demand,” Missouri’s national reputation—and Stark’s political prospects for U.S. Congress—stood to suffer greatly.<sup>784</sup>

In reality, Stark’s proclamation marked the culmination of a three-year-long effort to find sufficient evidence to prosecute the boss—an effort that had the backing not only of reform-minded state officials, but also President Roosevelt and J. Edgar Hoover. Since 1936, Stark and Maurice Milligan, the U.S. Attorney for Western Missouri, had been digging for clues regarding Pendergast’s colossal graft payoffs, his multi-million-dollar horse racing addiction, and his role in a major insurance fraud case in Missouri that had yielded a \$750,000 payoff. In an assertion that was sure to prompt federal involvement, Stark and Milligan claimed that none of the boss’s income had yielded any tax revenue to the U.S. government.

The Bureau of Internal Revenue launched a formal investigation into Pendergast’s tax dodging in May 1938, and by the following January, federal judge Albert Reeves had convened a grand jury to investigate the full suite of evasions undertaken by Pendergast and his cronies. The investigation eventually verified that Pendergast had failed to report an astronomical sum—\$1,240,745.22—to the IRS as income, and consequently owed, after penalties, \$840,000 in taxes.<sup>785</sup> (His unreported income also reflected the pecuniary gains of the clandestine insurance deal, verified in July 1939 when a guilt party in the scheme confessed to the grand jury). Pendergast, a man whose obtuse methods had made him largely immune for the majority of his career, was now faced with an airtight case, and on Good Friday, April 7, 1939, he appeared in court for fingerprinting and to give bond for two counts of tax evasion.<sup>786</sup>

With the machine’s collapse looking more and more imminent, insiders began resorting to extreme measures to save the sinking ship. Machine employees took to burning city records and dumping files into the Missouri River. Others simply folded. On May 2, 1939, the day after Pendergast and several others pled not guilty, Edward L. Schneider, a loyal henchman and secretary-treasurer of eight Pendergast businesses, opted for suicide over survival. As *Time* reported in its coverage of the Kansas City drama, Schneider’s, “new black Buick sedan . . . was found parked in the middle of Fairfax Bridge across the Missouri River. In it were records of Pendergast companies and two suicide notes to Schneider relatives. In dust on the bridge railing were two hand marks and a heel print, such as a man might make in climbing over to end it all. Two miles downstream, Schneider’s grey hat floated inshore.”<sup>787</sup>

Pendergast eventually folded as well, revising his earlier plea on May 22, 1939. Reformers balked at what they felt was a soft sentencing under Judge Merrill Otis—fifteen months in Federal prison and a \$10,000 fine—but others knew that this was not the full punishment. The strict terms of

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<sup>782</sup> Haskell and Fowler, *City of the Future*, 132.

<sup>783</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 180-181; *Kansas City Star* (December 23, 1938).

<sup>784</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 169. Reddig, *Tom’s Town*, 279-280. Westbrook Pegler, “Westbrook Pegler Says,” *Kansas City Journal-Post*, February 19, 1938, 18; cited in Driggs and Haddix, 170.

<sup>785</sup> Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 140; Reddig, *Tom’s Town*, 329.

<sup>786</sup> Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 139-141.

<sup>787</sup> “Vanishing Henchman,” *Time* (May 15, 1939), 17.

Pendergast's five-year probation, which essentially stipulated an existence devoid of any political calculating, gambling, or wielding of power, were tantamount to a life sentence for the ailing sixty-six-year-old man.<sup>788</sup> In late May 1939, when Pendergast entered the gates of Leavenworth penitentiary, a facility only thirty miles from his baronial home at 5650 Ward Parkway, his prison booking photo revealed the physical toll of his fate.<sup>789</sup> The thick-necked, pugnacious, and invincible politician had shrunk into a gaunt figure whose sunken eyes expressed the awareness that he had lost every bit of the power he had so assiduously built. Pendergast, after all, was a small-town man deep down, and his myopic focus on Kansas City and his own ego-driven pursuit of power had left the machine with neither clear supporting networks nor an effective heir apparent.

The ensuing clean-up was consequently as swift as it was comprehensive. In early summer of 1939, the state took back control of Kansas City's police force and sent thirty-nine-year-old Lear B. Reed to take the helm.<sup>790</sup> Reed, a former FBI agent familiar with Kansas City's underworld, began a two-year project of halting the prostitution, political corruption, and racketeering—a task that required the entire police force to be “cleaned, bathed, soaked, disinfected, deloused, and aired in the sun.”<sup>791</sup> Meanwhile, additional federal investigations sent many of Pendergast's right-hand men to Leavenworth in his wake, including former police director Otto P. Higgins and gambling syndicate leader Charles Carollo. Ongoing audits, investigations, and trials purged even deeper levels of the halls of power, ousting numerous administrators, judges, and prosecutors.<sup>792</sup> FBI agents also took to rooting out many of the illegal racketeering and illegal substance rings that had flourished for nearly two decades. On April 12, 1940, agents busted thirteen men who ran heroin ring that generated \$12 million per year, an amount equal to the city's annual budget.<sup>793</sup>

Despite the machine's efforts to destroy evidence of the extent of Kansas City's corruption, investigators were able to get their hands on enough documents to grasp the full cost of the Pendergast's rule.<sup>794</sup> When investigators finished their audits, the true damage of the machine's rule was in stark relief. The city's ghost votes in the 1936 election had numbered between fifty and sixty thousand, the municipal payroll included six thousand employees—twice as many a city of Kansas City's size needed—and McElroy's “country bookkeeping” had ensured that the seemingly Depression-proof city was \$20 million in debt.<sup>795</sup> Over three-quarters of the Ten-Year Plan's \$33 million—the funds that had given Kansas City its skyscraping City Hall—were found to have been spent without contracts or competitive bidding.<sup>796</sup> The city's lauded “Pendergast prosperity,” it turned out, was a work of pure artifice.

Troops from Jefferson City and Washington, D.C. were not alone in dismantling the machine. A coalition of civic groups, women's organizations, groups representing the National Youth Movement, and a prominent local Rabbi had been conspiring to unseat Pendergast since the early 1930s, and were joined by the anti-machine *Kansas City Star* and many prominent businessmen in the

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<sup>788</sup> Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 150; Reddig, *Tom's Town*, 329. As Judge Otis claimed, “Pendergast was sentenced to wear the badge of ‘convict’ for one year and three months behind penitentiary walls, in the seclusion of a prison, and then to wear it for five years longer before the eyes of his fellow men.” Quoted in Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 150.

<sup>789</sup> Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 152.

<sup>790</sup> Larsen and Hulston, “Criminal Aspects of the Pendergast Machine,” 180.

<sup>791</sup> Reed, *Human Wolves*, 259-263.

<sup>792</sup> Reddig, *Tom's Town*, 330.

<sup>793</sup> Gilbert, *This City, This Man*, 5; Milligan, *Missouri Waltz*, 198; Reddig, *Tom's Town*, 327-328.

<sup>794</sup> Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 169.

<sup>795</sup> Bill Gilbert, *This City, This Man: The Cookingham Era in Kansas City* (Washington, DC: International City Management Association, 1978), 4.

<sup>796</sup> Reddig, *Tom's Town*, 334-336.

mid-to-late 1930s.<sup>797</sup> Members of these groups were largely responsible for the formation of the United Campaign Committee, which won a charter-amendment election in 1940 to essentially remove all existing city officials and replace them in a special election. City Hall was subsequently filled with businessmen types and South Side women donning small brooms pinned to their lapels—all intent on cleaning up their city’s tarnished image.<sup>798</sup> When eight out of nine reform candidates triumphed in the special election in April 1941, it was clear that the municipal powers of the Pendergast machine had been extinguished.<sup>799</sup> After an interim city manager fired the bulk of the Pendergast department heads, the council brought in L. Perry Cookingham to serve as the full-time city manager. A nonpartisan and founder of the national association for city managers, Cookingham had the bland, businesslike approach to city government for which many reformers had longed.<sup>800</sup>

With a bureaucratic, transparent government in place, the tenuous balance that had existed between Kansas City’s “pink and violet domestic virtues” and its “vigorous pagan life” would finally succumb to the former.<sup>801</sup> As Stark sent agents into Kansas City to enforce state liquor restrictions that had gone unobserved for years, clubs and bars around the Eighteenth and Vine corridor and on Twelfth Street were forced to close their doors at 2am and to remain closed on Sundays. As a columnist in the *Kansas City Call* lamented, “the lid is back on the night clubs in this burg these days and consequently the ‘drag’ with its subsequent outlets for fast living is again draped in its cloth of black and bears every resemblance of a mourning widow.” And as he went on to explain, “[o]ne would think that just because the present probe is centered on the gambling racket that the night clubs and beer parlors would more or less be exempt from strictly adhering to the closing hour law but that is not so. ... [M]ost of the beer parlors and so-called night clubs are just fronts for the horrible and distasteful ‘crap shooting’ that takes place within its rear portals.”<sup>802</sup>

The effects on the city’s jazz landscape were predictable. The death of the Pendergast machine spelled the terminal decline of what Ross Russell calls the “last incubating place in the superheated culture of the black ghettos where jazz flowered.”<sup>803</sup> Eight prominent nightclubs, including the famous Reno, shut their doors almost immediately.<sup>804</sup> Raids on cabarets that tried to duck the new enforcements sent many patrons and musicians to jail. Black Musicians’ Union president William Shaw spent many nights bailing out musicians.<sup>805</sup> Deprived of late night and early morning customers, club owners trimmed or eliminated entertainment budgets and replaced live bands with jukeboxes. The rekindling of recording activity and national tours during the late ‘30s was already affecting the centripetal energy Kansas City’s jazz scene, but the shockwave of the machine’s defeat dealt a fatal and decisive blow to the energetic world, making alternative opportunities all the more appealing. With their prospects severely diminished, many musicians would begin to look for supplemental income or jobs in other cities, and even the biggest bands would continue the exodus to New York

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<sup>797</sup> Ibid, 225-231, 300. Rabbi Samuel Mayerberg published his own account of the battles with the machine in *Chronicle of an American Crusader* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1944).

<sup>798</sup> Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 322.

<sup>799</sup> Larsen and Hulston, *Pendergast!*, 170.

<sup>800</sup> Ibid., 171; Gilbert, *This City, This Man*, passim.

<sup>801</sup> O’Sheel, “Kansas City,” 377.

<sup>802</sup> E. Leroy Brown, “These Names Make the News,” *Kansas City Call* (February 10, 1939), 16; quoted in Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 181.

<sup>803</sup> Russell, *Jazz Style in Kansas City and the Southwest*, xvii.

<sup>804</sup> Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 182.

<sup>805</sup> Ibid.

initiated by Count Basie and Andy Kirk during the late '30s. With Jay McShann and Howard Leonard decamping in the early 1940s, the end of Kansas City's identity as a living jazz cradle was certain.<sup>806</sup>

By 1942, none of the famous Kansas City bands was left in the city, and when iconic blues shouter and Sunset Café owner Piney Brown died in the summer of 1940, it seemed a fitting symbol for the machine's collapse and the decline of one of America's most unique jazz cradles.<sup>807</sup> Brown had long been a champion of struggling musicians, and when Kansas City jazz greats Joe Turner and Pete Johnson collaborated to immortalize their fallen friend in a November 1940 recording of "Piney Brown Blues," the sense of loss went beyond that of simply a single human being. "More than a fine rendition of a popular song," writes a prominent jazz historian, the piece is "to know the cry of the blues in all of its pain and anguish." "It is a poignant lament, a heartfelt jeremiad, a profound musical snapshot and document of a man, a time, and a place central to the history of jazz."<sup>808</sup>

Yes, I dreamed last night, I was standing on the corner of 18th and Vine,  
Yes, I dreamed last night, I was standing on the corner of 18th and Vine,  
I shook hands with Piney Brown and could hardly keep from cryin'.<sup>809</sup>

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The final approach to the 1940s spelled opposite fates for the respective landscapes of Pendergast and Nichols. In 1939, as Pendergast sat powerless in Leavenworth, Nichols was christened "America's foremost subdivider and realtor-builder" by the *National Real Estate Journal*. The accolade that was no hollow platitude. Since the mid-'30s, Nichols had come to hold center stage in discussions of national housing policy, and had even ventured to the Oval Office to advise Franklin Roosevelt on developing the Home Owners' Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Administration, the two key entities of New Deal housing reform. The Nichols Company handbook served as a primer for many of the new housing guidelines, and entire sections of the policies that had shaped Nichols' "high-class, restricted properties" were lifted verbatim and placed at the center of the housing policies that would guide the middle-class suburban expansion of every American city from New York to Los Angeles in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s.<sup>810</sup>

It was inevitable, then, that Kansas City—in the wake of the symbolic victory of the South Side—would experience a shift in character defined by the newest wave of suburbanization. Under Nichols' guidance, the social domain of the Country Club District would expand yet again, except this time with a new format and sense of purpose. Nichols, still the shaper of what he saw as an imperial capital, pushed the federal government to look to the industrial districts of Kansas City for potential munitions plants—something he was able to do as a member of the Advisory Council for National Defense. His requests were granted, and with the arrival of new factories in Leeds and Fairfax, Nichols and his company recalibrated their approach to realizing Kansas City's suburban prosperity. If his 1920s suburbs had been the domain of the affluent professional, the '40s rendition would court the prosperous factory worker and subsequently the returning war veteran.

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<sup>806</sup> Ibid., *Kansas City Jazz*, 182-183, 207-212; A handful of musicians, like Jay McShann, were able to divert to country clubs and white establishments like Clair Martin's Plaza Tavern. See Driggs and Haddix, *Kansas City Jazz*, 170-171.

<sup>807</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>808</sup> Schuller, *The Swing Era*, 796.

<sup>809</sup> Joe Turner and Pete Johnson, "Piney Brown Blues."

<sup>810</sup> Tanner Colby, *Some of My Best Friends are Black: The Strange Story of Integration in America* (New York: Viking, 2012), 96.

By the 1950s, the “vast inland city” of the early 1900s that writer Edward Dahlberg waxed nostalgic about in his 1964 memoir—the city whose physical and social edges seemed to bleed into the country and its rural ways—would be carried into the era of post-war suburban sprawl.<sup>811</sup> The look of Levittown and Lakewood would come to Kansas City most conspicuously in the form of new developments of modestly-sized tract homes in subdivisions like Armour Hills Gardens in Missouri and Fairway and Prairie Village in Kansas—all virtual extensions of the Country Club District decorated with classical statuary to signal ties to the suburban core.<sup>812</sup>

In a 1945 portrait of the newly “sobered” Kansas City in the *Saturday Evening Post*, George Sessions Perry wrote that while Kansas City was “proud of its new orderliness, of its civic virtues restored,” it was still “down in its heart . . . just as proud of its turbulent, hell-roaring and remarkably happy past.”<sup>813</sup> Such statements were easy to make given that the crime and corruption were becoming little more than a memory. Pendergast, after all, had died of a heart condition in January, giving the city a formal sense of release from its unsavory reputation. When Nichols died in 1950, the *Kansas City Star* offered the opposite sentiment, invoking in a memorial piece the famous inscription on the plaque for Sir Christopher Wren in St. Paul’s Cathedral: “if you seek his monument, look about you.”

Looking around Kansas City—at the seasoning Country Club District and its environs, at the Liberty Memorial, at the Nelson-Atkins Museum, at the humming factories—most could see the evidence of the deceased builder’s legacy already in place. Yet the invocation was also prophetic. For in the ensuing years, as Union Station fell into disuse, as the city’s streetcar tracks were torn up, as urban renewal tore out sections of the old jazz core, and as a white suburban exodus into municipalities in Kansas created one of America’s starkest racial divides, the city’s symbolic core would shift irrevocably from downtown to the Country Club Plaza, ushering in the Kansas City of the twentieth century’s second half—the middling, plainspoken city whose personality was dominated, for better or worse, by a veneer of Midwestern placidness and suburban uniformity.<sup>814</sup> The stereotype made sense. For no other city had a fully intact and uniquely successful automobile suburb at its physical and symbolic core. Nor did any other city have such a clear demonstration of that landscape’s conflicted legacy, with a progeny of post-war housing developments rolling out seamlessly in one direction to face off against an increasingly impoverished black ghetto on the other.

That geography exemplified a new era of polarization in the American metropolis, but if the place that Shaemas O’Sheel had christened the “city of contrasts” in 1928 contained the roots of that landscape, then so too did it contain a bundle of contradictions that would never be seen again.<sup>815</sup> The incendiary and tenuous politics of Pendergast, the defensive suburban ideal of Nichols, the tumbling canvases and personality of Benton, and the innovative strains of the likes of Bennie Moten and Count Basie—these were the products of an urban culture that had built its monuments on shifting sands in an era defined by transition, a time of reckoning with the tensions between what the American city had been, and what it would yet become. It was fitting, then, that Evan Connell put at the center of his portrait of Mrs. Bridge—the placid, flawed, and empathetic South Side heroine—a scene that brings her face to face with nothing less than the threat of destruction. Sitting in the dining room of the Kansas City Country Club, Mrs. Bridge—ever anxious about the erosion of her traditional values in an era of moral and social upheaval—hears the muffled roar of an approaching tornado, and

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<sup>811</sup> Edward Dahlberg, *Because I Was Flesh: The Autobiography of Edward Dahlberg* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 1-2, 11-12, 33.

<sup>812</sup> Haskell, *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, 323-324.

<sup>813</sup> George Sessions Perry, “The Cities of America: Kansas City,” *The Saturday Evening Post* 218, no. 8 (August 18, 1945): 39.

<sup>814</sup> See Rhodes, “Cupcake Land,” *passim*.

<sup>815</sup> O’Sheel, “Kansas City,” 375.



wonders, as the sky begins to darken and the wind begins to flash, if “the distant thunder seemed to be warning her that one day this world she knew and loved would be annihilated.”<sup>816</sup>

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<sup>816</sup> Connell, *Mrs. Bridge*, 142.

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