City of the Future: Kansas City's Progressive Utopia

Western Historical Manuscript Collection
Kansas City

Charles N. Kimball Lecture

Harry Haskell
April 10, 2008

INTRODUCTION
to the April 10, 2008 Charles N. Kimball Lecture

David Boutros
Associate Director, WHMC-KC

Good afternoon. My name is David Boutros and I am the Associate Director of the Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City, host of the Charles N. Kimball Lecture series.

Today I wish to bring you exciting news. After various fits and starts, the Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City will definitely be building a new facility as part of the expanded Miller Nichols Library here on the University of Missouri-Kansas City campus. Our plan and hope is that completion will be within four years.

As you have heard from me before, the mission of the Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City, a joint collection of the University of Missouri and the State Historical Society of Missouri, is to support the research needs of Missouri residents, University faculty and students, and the general public, by collecting, preserving, and making available various primary source materials documenting the history of the state and the region. During our 28 years of operation, we have grown to be one of the largest collections in the region with more than 15,000 linear feet of material containing: in excess of 15 million pages of manuscripts; more than 5 million negative and photographic images; 400,000+ sheets of architectural drawings and maps; 400 rolls of microfilm and 80,000 aperture cards and microfiche; over 10,000 volumes of books, scrapbooks and ledgers; and more than 3,000 hours of audio visual material including oral histories, home movies, and promotional, educational, and commercial moving images. WHMC-KC is the place where Kansas City's regional history resides.

WHMC-KC has contributed research assistance for an uncounted number of books, articles, dissertations, theses, term papers, and documentaries—as well as helped scratch the itch of persons curious about Kansas City's regional history. Additionally, WHMC-KC has published two books and provided access to both primary and secondary data, such as reprinting Dr. Charles N. Kimball's Midcontinent Perspectives series, and research papers on the WHMC-KC webpages at www.umkc.edu/WHMCKC/.

The WHMC-KC needs space to properly process, make available, and house its large and growing collection of historical records. Currently over 90 per cent of the collection is stored off-site from the main offices of WHMC-KC requiring 24-48 hours to be retrieved. Moreover, special materials such as architectural drawings, photographs, and moving images (film and video) need special equipment and environments to correctly handle and store them. The new facility we propose to build will have those necessary amenities.

The goal of WHMC-KC is to renovate 15,000 square feet of the ground floor of the Miller Nichols Library on the University of Missouri-Kansas City campus. WHMC-KC facility will have its own entrance, and though in the Library, will not be part of the Library and is not included in the Library's funding plan or requests.

This new facility will assure the long-term preservation of the WHMC-KC current and future collections; bring all of our collections into one location providing immediate access rather than the current 24-48 hour wait; and give the staff the equipment and room to undertake both routine and special projects to the benefit of the collections, researchers, and the public. These will include exhibits, publications, greater levels of processing and description, and transfer of materials to more accessible modern formats.

- A 2,000 square foot RESEARCH ROOM where the collection may securely and comfortably be used.
- A 600 square foot MICROFILM ROOM in which our microform collections may be accessed.
- A 1,000 square foot GALLERY (exhibit area) where the WHMC-KC collections and other institutions' materials may be exhibited.
- A 900 square foot CLASS/MEETING ROOM to accommodate classes of students and groups meeting in our offices.
- A 300 square foot STUDIO/MEETING ROOM in which we will conduct video and oral history interviews to be added to our collection.
- A 1,000 square foot AUDIOVISUAL LAB to work with and transfer our large film and video collection to modern media. Additionally, the services of this lab—a facility unique in the Kansas City region—will be available to other area institutions.
- A 600 square foot IMAGING LAB with equipment to digitally scan photographs, documents, and architectural drawings for research use and publication.
- A 1,000 square foot CONSERVATION LAB in which special processing and preservation can be applied to materials.
- A flexible 3,000 square foot STAFF OFFICE/WORK AREA for current and future staff, including grant funded staff.
- A 1,500 square foot NEGATIVE AND FILM STORAGE area with the appropriate environment for the long term storage of these fragile materials.
- A 1,500 square foot OVERSIZE STORAGE for items that are too large to be shelved in standard storage.
- Storage in the Miller Nichols Library's automated storage and retrieval system (ASRS) for 42,000 cubic feet of records—sufficient space for 15 years growth.

Now for the hard part—we need to raise $2 million to renovate existing space for WHMC-KC and purchase the necessary equipment and furnishing for that new facility. Additionally, we wish to establish a $1 million endowment to support the operation of the facility and programming.

WHMC-KC shares with the late Dr. Charles N. Kimball the belief that ideas move people to action. His credo, "Chance favors a prepared mind," reflects the confidence that the truest form of creativity requires that we look two directions at once—to the past for guidance and inspiration and to the future with hope and purpose. The study of experiences, both individual and communal—that is to say history—prepares us to understand and articulate the present, and to create our future—to face challenges and to seize opportunities.

Right now our opportunity is a facility that will provide growth and needed environments to preserve the collections and room for programming and storage, permitting the Western Historical Manuscript Collection-Kansas City to provide a greater level of service to the community, and researchers to use our rich collection to the thoughtful understanding of the past, present, and future.

Monroe Dodd

An editor, *Kansas City Star*

Anyone who dabbles in Kansas City's past—even half-heartedly, even occasionally—ought to come away impressed at what a town this has been.

So much has happened here, so many main currents of American life have flowed through our institutions and our society.

Kansas City sat smack in the middle of the building of the American West. We welcomed railroads and skyscrapers and all those projects financed by Eastern money and constructed by Midwestern sweat. Our economy thrived on livestock and grain from the ranches and farms across the plains. We had our lumber barons, and our banking barons. We've seen economic ebb and flood.

We've seen political ebb and flood, too. We've lived with boss rule and with reform, with conservatives and progressives, with nativism and racism and also with tolerance, with management and with labor. To that list of theses and antitheses, add the matter of Missouri and Kansas. While you're at it, city and suburb.

As fascinating as our city's history—full disclosure: I have a bias here—is this newspaper that's been around for the last century and a quarter of Kansas City's existence. The *Kansas City Star* has observed all of this and recounted at least a goodly part of it to Kansas Citians. Of course, the *Star* does this recounting in its own way, sometimes even offering its opinion. Well, all right, more than sometimes. In a century and a quarter, depending on the vigor and the politics of its management, the *Star* has pushed Kansas City this way and pulled that.

Kansas City and the *Star*: These are twin topics that today's speaker weaves through his book. Harry Haskell came at this weaving from an interesting perspective.

First, of all, Harry goes a ways back with the *Star*.

Harry was at the *Star*, working as a music critic in the 1970s after brief careers as copy boy and intern. The 1970s was when I began there. I was in my late 20s then. By outward appearance, Harry still is. I marvel at his ability to look so young and move so nimbly. The rest of us have aged so gracelessly. Harry, it makes me wish that, like you, I had ridden my bicycle to work each day.

But of course, Harry has a bigger connection to the *Star* than simply having worked there himself. His father, Henry C. Haskell, was at the *Star* before him, from 1929 to 1977, chronicling Kansas City through the middle of the 20th century. And Harry's grandfather, Henry J. Haskell, was at the *Star* before the turn of the 20th century, working at the right hand of William Rockhill Nelson and continuing at the paper until he died in harness in 1952. The name Haskell, symbolic of long, erudite service to the readers of Kansas City, is legend at the *Star*.

Harry's book on the *Star* and Kansas City, named *Boss-Busters & Sin Hounds*—after a phrase coined by a Haskell—is the product of hard-working scholarship. For me, it has been a wonderful read.

Boss-Busters & Sin Hounds is clearly the product of Harry's own academic temperament. But there's more than diligent scholarship here. His research quite obviously was energized by his family's role in the newspaper and in the life of Kansas City.

After a stint at the *Star*, Harry in 1984 went on to other pursuits, among them a book on the revival of early music. He spent 16 years at the Yale University Press. Today, he lives in Guilford, Connecticut.

Harry left behind at the newspaper hundreds of us who do not carry the name Haskell but who do carry on our shoulders all the legacy left by those Haskells of the past, and all the legacy and baggage left by William Rockhill Nelson and Roy Roberts and successors too numerous to name.

Over the years, I've learned what happens when you tell someone that you work at the *Star*. Say that to an old-line Democrat and he or she will poke at you about working for that Republican rag. That Democrat will recount how Roy Roberts chose for Page One a picture of the Binaggio-Gargotta murder scene, a bloody tableau indeed, that just happened to show a big portrait of President Truman on the wall overlooking the bodies on the floor.

Tell a Republican you work at the *Star*, and you'll get an earful about Lee Judge.

Tell anyone you work at the *Star* and they'll ask: Wow, do you talk much to Jason Whitlock?

In fact, in his own sphere and in his own vigor, Jason bears more than a passing resemblance to William Rockhill Nelson. Jason's specialty in journalism is to be one of nature's insurgents.

That's a phrase our speaker uses in his book… about William Rockhill Nelson.

Nelson, for three and a half decades, used his *Star* to push and pull his adopted city in directions he wanted it to go.

Sometimes, the city agreed with him. At the turn of the 20th century, that way was toward progressivism.

And that's Harry's topic today. Nelson and Kansas City and that engrossing time in our history when Kansas City marched in the vanguard of a social movement.

I'm pleased, then, to introduce to you this spring's Charles Kimball lecturer, Harry Haskell.

City of the Future: Kansas City's Progressive Utopia

Harry Haskell
author of *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds: Kansas City and Its "Star"*

April 10, 2008

City of the Future, as some of you may know, is the title of a centennial history of Kansas City that my father wrote with a colleague at the *Kansas City Star* back in 1950. I chose it as the title of my talk today because the phrase "city of the future" is so rich in associations, both historical and contemporary. Among other things, it captures the outlook of the men and women who laid the foundations for the great era of American city building in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Theirs was an optimistic, can-do, nose-to-the-front philosophy. Their faith in the future was founded on an unshakable belief in the fundamental decency and intelligence of the human race. They were convinced that society was capable of moving forward and creating a better, juster world. In a word, they were progressives.

My grandfather, Henry J. Haskell, came of age at a time when the original cohort of progressive reformers and city builders was in full cry. In 1901, as a newly appointed editorial writer for the *Star*, he proudly told his parents that he hoped "to help a little in the building of Kansas City." In later years, after he had risen to become the newspaper's editor, Grandfather preferred to think of himself not as a progressive but as a "practical idealist." In his career in public life, he had watched reform movements come and go. His youthful dreams of a progressive city of the future had long since been tempered by experience. Constant exposure to humanity's follies and foibles hadn't made him hard-hearted or cynical. It had, however, taught him that progress, more often than not, was a matter of taking two steps backward for every one step forward.

Henry Joseph Haskell (1874-1952), ca. 1944.

Toward the end of his life, Haskell looked back over half a century of high-minded reform efforts and acknowledged that the progressive movement had failed to deliver on many of its promises. To his friend Wiley Rutledge, an associate justice of the United States Supreme Court, he wrote in 1948: "One of our first crusades after I came on the *Star* was against election crookedness. We are still crusading. We favored all sorts of social progress measures on the ground that they would cure glaring evils. An immense number of things have

been done to do away with juvenile delinquency—a boys hotel, the juvenile courts, recreation centers, etc. But juvenile delinquency remains one of our big problems. I recall so vividly the years just before World War one. There seemed to be growing tolerance, spreading democracy, the duma arriving in Russia, the Reichstag gaining more and more power—the world definitely on the forward path. And now!" By all rights, my grandfather observed to another old friend, "Kansas City ought to be a Heaven-on-earth today. Curious how human nature keeps getting in the way of Utopia."

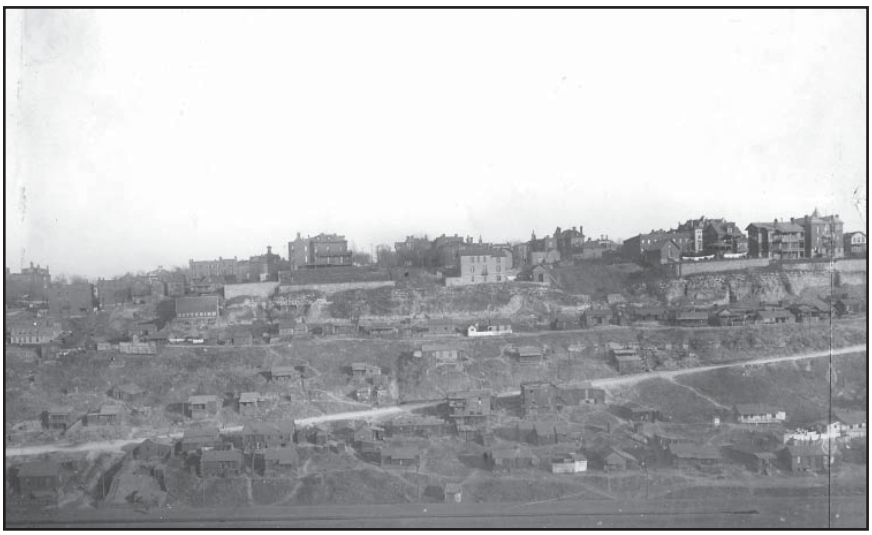
Like all utopias, the progressives' city of the future was built as much on dreams as on the cold, hard logic of experience. By the late 1940s, two world wars and a Great Depression had undermined its foundations. The progressive movement itself had split asunder. In the New Deal era, many old-line, Teddy Roosevelt progressives veered sharply to the right, bitterly disillusioned by what they saw as Franklin Roosevelt's irresponsible social and economic policies and by the rising menace of world communism. Haskell, however, remained true to the bedrock values that had sustained him throughout his life—tolerance, moderation, respect for civil liberties and civil discourse—even as they came under attack in the age of the atomic bomb and McCarthy witch hunts. Looking back, he saw that the progressives' idealistic agenda of civic beautification, social justice, and political reform had been impractical all along. Human nature never changed; it would always stand in the way of utopia. If that home truth sometimes drove him to despair, it also gave him hope—hope that in the long run the better angels of our nature would prevail often enough to keep society moving on the forward path.

In writing my book *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, which examines Kansas City's home-grown progressive movement and its legacy, I made an effort to see the world through the eyes of Haskell and his contemporaries. I wanted to find out not only what they accomplished but also what they hoped to accomplish and what they believed they had accomplished. I tried to understand the influences and experiences that inspired them, molded their outlooks, and defined their roles as political actors. By charting my grandfather's life journey from idealistic progressive to practical idealist, I hoped to gain insight into the historic strengths and weaknesses of the progressive movement, as well as a clearer understanding of its ongoing relevance to social and political life today.

Like all life journeys, my grandfather's was measured in geographical as well as intellectual terms. Picture then, if you will, the Kansas City he encountered when he first came here in 1896 as a footloose twenty-two-year-old fresh out of Oberlin College in rural Ohio, with twenty dollars in his pocket and a head full of dreams.

Kansas City's Union Depot in the West Bottoms, ca. 1894.

Arriving by train from the north, he stepped through the doors of the old Union Depot onto a street scene that looked something like this. The horse-drawn cabs that lined Union Avenue, waiting to pick up carriage-trade customers, were beyond his means. Instead, he caught a streetcar, or perhaps a cable car, that carried him up one of the famously vertiginous inclines to the summit of Quality Hill. Looking back across the West Bottoms, he surveyed a gritty industrial landscape of factories, grain elevators, mills, and packinghouses, the engines of Kansas City's burgeoning smokestack economy. A glance out the side window, however, suggested that the mighty juggernaut of progress had left many of the city's less fortunate inhabitants trailing in the dust.



West Bluffs and Shanty Town, south of 9th Street. Taken by Sid Hare, November 1893.

This is a photo of the West Bluffs, at the base of Quality Hill, taken in 1893. After lodging temporarily with the family of a college classmate, young Harry took a room in a small boardinghouse at 1512 Oak Street, a teeming working-class neighborhood on the southern end of the downtown business district. Two years later, he used his first paychecks from the *Star* to rent a modest bungalow in the comparatively suburban setting of the 2400 block of Tracy. Two years after that, he and his new bride moved into a larger house just across the street, and it was there that my father, their only child, spent the first two years of his life.

At the turn of the twentieth century, this newly developed middle-class neighborhood was a tidy enclave of unpretentious frame houses and sturdy brick apartment buildings. It was bounded on the west by the stately mansions of the local aristocracy that once lined Troost Avenue, and on the east by the scattered remnants of early pioneer farmsteads. The atmosphere was genteel and cultured. Among the Haskells' neighbors on Tracy were the family of Ted Shawn, who would later become a celebrated modern dancer, and Harold Bell Wright, the bestselling author of *That Printer of O'Dells* and other novels now forgotten. The Paseo hadn't yet been cut through this far south, but just down the street from the Haskell abode lay Troost Lake, where one could rent

Henry Cummings Haskell (1902-1981), ca. 1903.

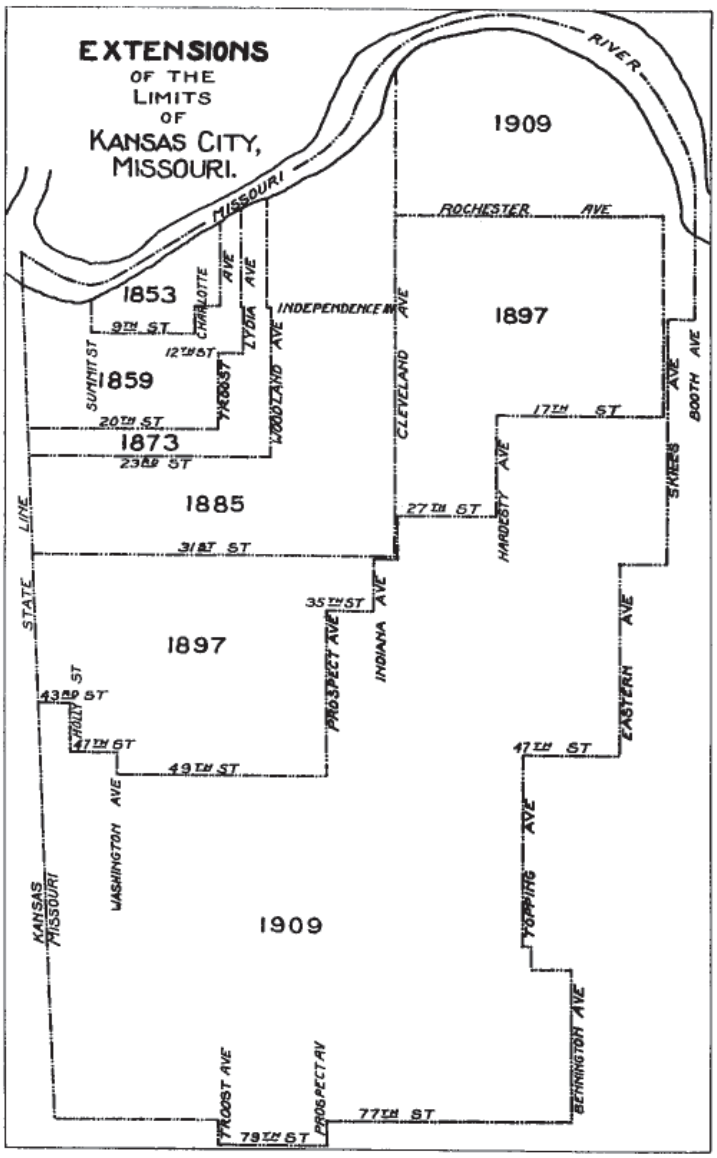
rowboats on lazy summer afternoons, and the nearby amusement park, with its popular roller coaster and dance pavilion.

These civilized amenities were hallmarks of the middle-class life style that city boosters and progressive reformers counted on to draw a "better class" of citizens to Kansas City. In the words of one of their leading spokesmen, "A beautiful city will always attract men who have money. They will want to invest their money in a city that is progressive and well governed. They will want to have homes in a city of that kind. They will want to establish business enterprises here." August Meyer's logic was unassailable, but the alluring picture he painted was incomplete. However many grassy parks and tree-lined streets the city provided for its residents, the less attractive side of modern urban life was never far out of sight. As my grandfather walked to work at the *Star*, which then had its offices at 11th and Grand, he could hardly avoid catching a glimpse and a whiff of the city's most notorious slum.

The McClure Flats back alley. From the *Third Annual Report of the Board of Public Welfare, April 18, 1911-April 15, 1912*, p. 55. "Lot congestion to the limit, yet the present law is not violated."

This photograph of McClure Flats was taken around 1912; looming in the background, you can see the Italianate brick water tower of the newly erected Star building at 18th and Grand. Such stark contrasts were typical of turn-of-the-century American cities. Like most metropolitan centers, Kansas City was crowded and chaotic. Urban planning and zoning were nonexistent. For the most part, rich and poor, black and white, laborers and professionals lived and worked in close proximity. The real estate frenzy of the 1880s had left its mark in every direction, from the old river wards to the mushrooming suburban subdivisions on the east and south sides. As the city's population multiplied, its boundaries pushed steadily outward, taking in more and more of the unincorporated farm and scrubland surrounding the valleys of the Blue River and Brush Creek.

When my grandfather arrived in 1896, the city limits stopped at what is now 31st Street on the south and Cleveland on the east. A year or so later they were extended to 49th Street, gobbling up the historic trailhead depot of Westport. By 1909 the city limits would vault all the way south to 75th Street, nearly doubling the size of the metropolitan area at a single bound. As the pace of growth accelerated, a number of prominent citizens began to worry that development was careening out of control. As early as 1893, August Meyer, the wealthy industrialist who headed the newly



formed Park Board, complained that the area between 31st Street and Brush Creek was littered with scruffy settlements that appeared to have been "sown by the whirlwind." The territory presented a general "appearance of raggedness" that was "all but indescribable." Meyer warned that "if on the South Side future growth should continue as it has begun, our city would in that direction be composed of alternating patches of good and poor residence localities."

As we all know, Meyer's worst fears didn't come to pass. The haphazard, patchwork pattern of growth that had characterized Kansas City in its early decades as a wide-open boomtown was not replicated on the south side. Beginning in the 1890s, the newer subdivisions laid out beyond 31st Street reflected a new concept of the city of the future—one that was predominantly residential, rather than mixed-use, in character; low-density rather than compact in plan; and segregated into discrete units that were socially and economically homogeneous.

For this blessing—or, as some would argue, mixed blessing—two remarkable men are largely responsible. William Rockhill Nelson and J.C. Nichols are familiar names to most Kansas Citians of a certain age. Each in his own way exerted a seminal and far-reaching impact on the city's physical development and its self-styled image as an up-to-date, progressive metropolis. Indeed, for people

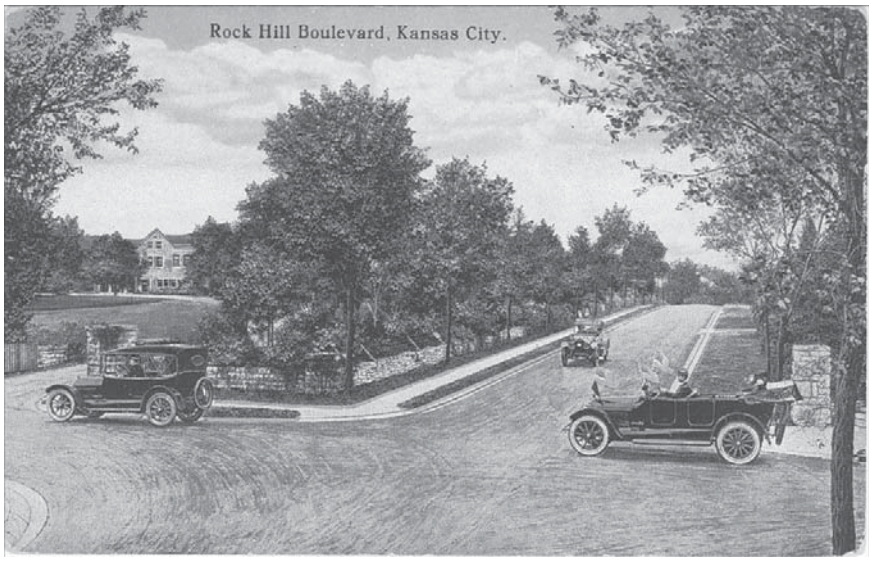
Jesse Clyde Nichols (1880-1950), ca. 1921.

like my grandfather, Nelson and Nichols embodied the very spirit of the progressive movement. Progressivism meant many things to many people, but at heart it was nothing less than an attempt to reconstruct American communities from the ground up, in a spiritual as well as a physical sense.

Nelson is best known, of course, as the cofounder of the *Kansas City Star*. A tireless crusader for social and political reform, he built the *Star* from a gossipy, four-page newssheet into one of America's great progressive newspapers. Like many of his fellow press lords, Nelson had a sideline career in real estate. He reasoned that if he ever expected to "get anywhere" with his newspaper, Kansas City would have to be made "into a place that somebody besides a few dollar swappers would want to live in." In the 1890s, Nelson was instrumental in planning the network of broad, European-style boulevards and gracious urban parks that transformed the dusty cow town into an advertisement for the City Beautiful movement. Then, between 1902 and his death in 1915, he put his money where his mouth was by constructing a model subdivision, the Rockhill district, which doubled as a high-class residential neighborhood and as a kind of company town for his notoriously underpaid employees at the *Star*.

William Rockhill Nelson (1841-1915), ca. 1897.

This early 20th-century postcard shows a somewhat romanticized view of the intersection of 45th and Oak Streets. That's Nelson's mansion, Oak Hall, peeking through the trees on what is now the site of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Note the early signs of traffic congestion. As befit a man of his station in life, Nelson owned a collection of luxury touring cars and employed a succession of well-paid chauffeurs to drive them. Less affluent Rockhill residents, however, relied



mostly on public transport to travel to and from downtown. As a service to them, Nelson induced the streetcar company to extend a line to his new subdivision and thoughtfully provided a tree-bowered, off-street right-of-way for it when he laid out Rockhill Road.

As the Rockhill district was taking shape, young J.C. Nichols was breaking ground for a radically different kind of residential development a mile or so to the south and west.

The Country Club district—so named because its centerpiece, the old Kansas City Country Club, was situated on the grounds of today's Loose Park—would go down in history as the prototypical twentieth-century automobile suburb. A kind of gated community without the gates, it had its own neighborhood associations, privatized municipal services, zoning-type regulations, social clubs, and commercial districts. (Industrial activity of any kind was strictly excluded.) The Country Club Plaza, the nation's first regional shopping center designed specifically for the automobile age, and its adjoining subdivisions would serve as models for countless planned residential communities around the country. J.C. Nichols's colonization of the south side stimulated the middle-class exodus from the old central city and ushered in an era of explosive suburban growth, with results that we are all familiar with today.

Huntington Road looking east from Central Street, September 1913.

My grandfather and his family moved into one of the first Nelson-built houses in Rockhill in 1904. A decade later, after living in a succession of rental properties in the neighborhood, they jumped onto the suburban bandwagon and bought a Nichols home near 60th and Wyandotte, in the Country Club district. After the war, the Haskells returned to Rockhill and built a somewhat larger Colonial-style house of their own. Then, a few years later, my grandfather and stepgrandmother moved south again, this time to a Georgian-style brick mansion the Nichols Company had erected on Meyer Circle, at the intersection of Meyer Boulevard and Ward Parkway. This pattern of residential migration was typical for

Seahorse Fountain at Meyer Circle.

Monument to August Meyer (1851-1905) on The Paseo.

members of the city's upwardly mobile professional class. As a correspondent for one national magazine observed, "The progress of the successful Kansas Citian will be marked by a train of homes, each one newer and more pretentious than the last, and each one farther south."

As the city's social center of gravity slowly shifted from north to south and east to west, the Country Club district came to epitomize the progressive, gentrifying spirit of the City Beautiful. By the 1920s, Ward Parkway had replaced the Paseo as the grandest of the city's Parisian-style grand boulevards.

Likewise, the ornate antique seahorse fountain in the middle of Meyer Circle, which J.C. Nichols purchased in Europe and donated to the city, symbolically eclipsed the understated monument to August Meyer at Tenth and the Paseo, with its dignified bas relief by Daniel Chester French.

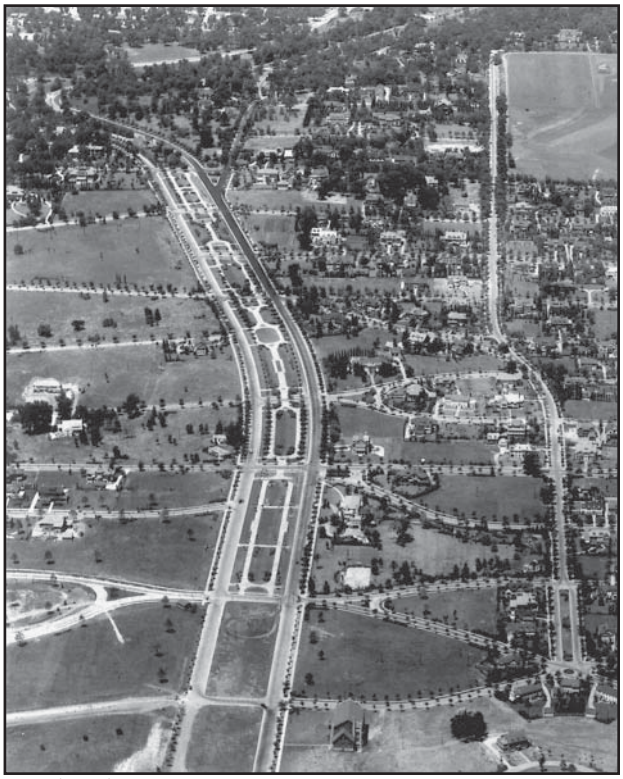
George Kessler, the brilliant landscape engineer whose design ideas inspired both the Paseo and Ward Parkway, had shrewdly anticipated this transition. In the 1890s, Kessler worked hand in glove with Meyer and Nelson as they prepared the ground for the vast system of parks and boulevards that made Kansas City the talk of the nation. But once it became clear that the suburban Country Club district, and not the older in-town neighborhoods, represented the city of the future, he smoothly transferred his allegiance to Nichols. Any correspondence Kessler may have had with Nelson has been lost, but his active role in the early phase of the Country Club development is documented in his extensive correspondence with Nichols and the developer's associates, now archived at the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis.

As the city's principal east-side thoroughfare, the Paseo was the backbone of the original boulevard system. Kessler's design for the broad double-roadway reflected both the naturalistic manner of Frederick Law Olmsted, the dean of American landscape architects, and the neoclassical formalism of the great 19th-century European city planners. The original segment of the Paseo, roughly from 9th to 18th streets, was Kessler's masterpiece.

The ornate median parkway, with its limestone terraces, stair-stepped pergola, and formal sunken gardens, offered middle-class Kansas Citians a taste of the aristocratic lifestyle associated with Old World cities and palaces. In fact, the eye-catching fountain that Kessler installed at 15th Street and the Paseo was modeled on one he had seen at Versailles. Unfortunately, Kessler's pièce de résistance proved to be a white elephant. Low water pressure reduced the graceful jets of water

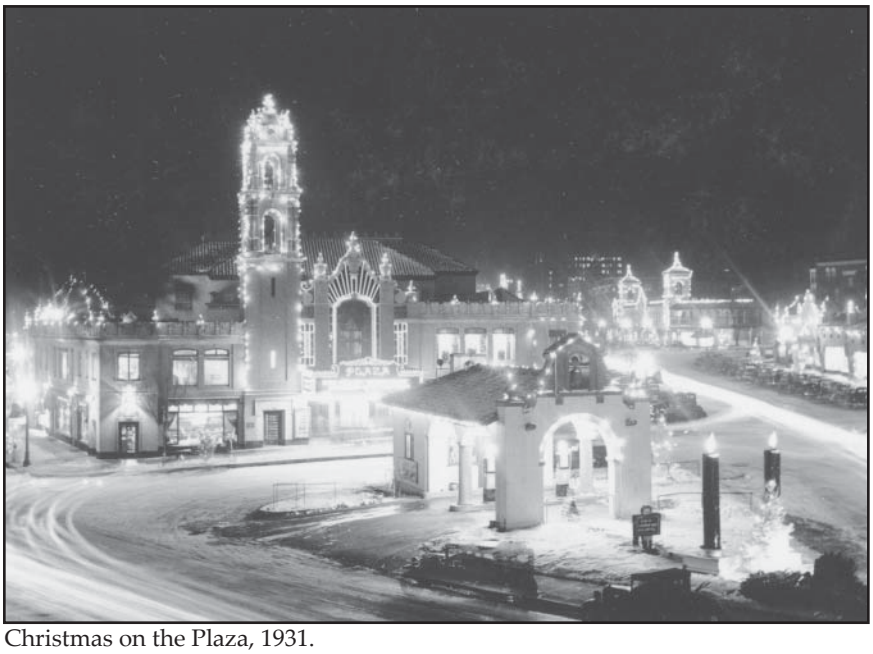
The Pergola, between 10th and 11th on The Paseo, 1900.

to burbling springs. A section of the great stone basin cracked and fell to pieces. Vandalism took a heavy toll and one evening, horror of horrors, a gang of hooligans pitched a young lady fully clothed into the shallow pool. In the end, the attractive nuisance was removed to make way for more flowerbeds.


Ward Parkway, ca. 1925.

Such high jinks were discouraged at the Meyer Fountain, where the baroque seahorses remained safely corralled within a wide traffic circle. Unlike the Paseo, Ward Parkway was not conceived as a series of small linear parks where fashionable people could disport and promenade. Its grassy median strip wasn't intended for active recreation, much less the parades and other public ceremonies that played such an important part in nineteenth-century civic life. Instead, Ward Parkway served as a neutral backdrop for a suburban life that was increasingly focused on the private sphere—on the sleek, self-contained automobiles that whisked up-to-date Kansas Citians from door to door and the hidden backyards that Nichols preferred to the sociable front porches of an earlier day.

In the early years of the twentieth century, then, Kansas Citians found themselves torn between two very different, and potentially incompatible, visions of the city of the future. One was essentially urban, centralized, and public, the other suburban, decentralized, and private. George Kessler and August Meyer had anticipated this dilemma in the landmark report they presented to the Park Board in 1893, laying out the rationale for spending millions of taxpayers' dollars on parks and boulevards. The report distinguished between villages, where homes, shops, and factories were jumbled together in picturesque disarray, and well-ordered cities in which residential neighborhoods were clearly defined and businesses would naturally seek out "establishments of the same character." Meyer, Kessler, and their allies asserted—wrongly, as we know now—that building parks and boulevards would stabilize established inner-city neighborhoods, discourage suburban flight, and preserve the city's predominantly urban character.


Christmas on the Plaza, 1931.

Nichols's upscale Country Club district, by contrast, was

inspired by the villages and garden suburbs he had visited in England as a college student. As such, its character was fundamentally antiurban. To put it another way, Nichols set out to create a kind of village within the city. (It's no coincidence that the city limits were extended to 75th Street in 1909, just as the Country Club development was shifting into high gear.) In pursuit of this goal, Nichols was obliged to execute a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, he consistently advocated comprehensive urban planning for Kansas City as a whole and associated himself with numerous worthy initiatives for downtown revitalization. On the other, he took planning into his own hands and provided for the well-to-do in a separate and exclusive enclave, with the Country Club Plaza as its own downtown.

Ironically, after going to extraordinary lengths to link his suburban developments to the boulevards that served the old central business district, Nichols gave Country Club residents every reason to avoid going there.

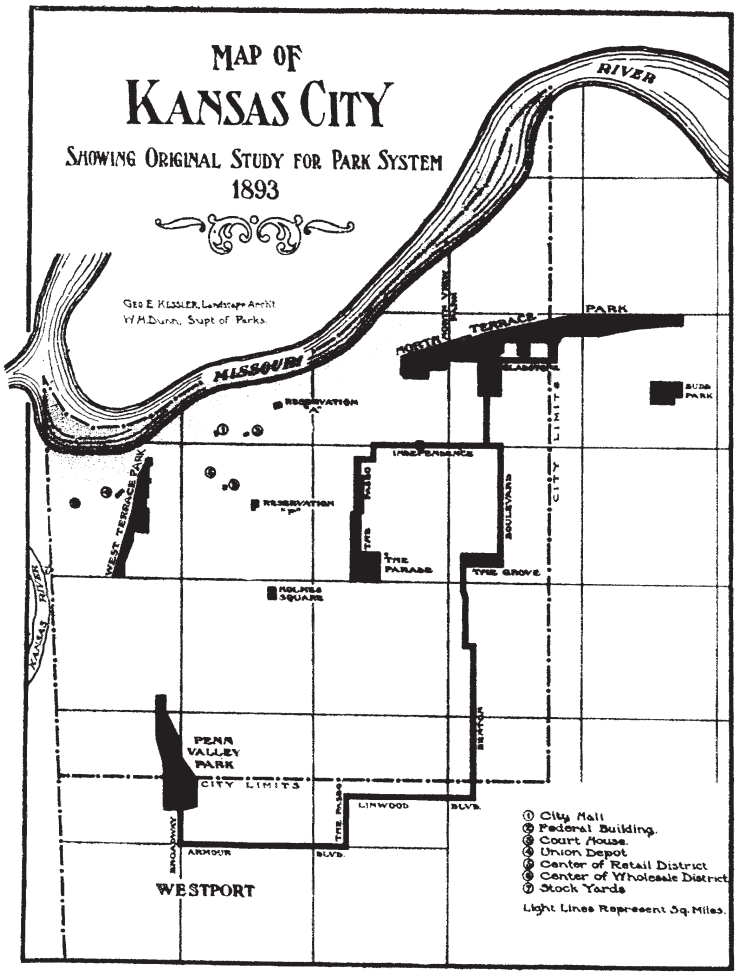
I've chosen to focus on Nichols and Nelson because their careers, as both developers and civic leaders, illuminate the tensions, compromises, and contradictions inherent in the progressive crusade to transform American cities and civic life. Both men were eulogized in the parlance of the day as "master builders," the highest accolade Kansas City's business establishment could bestow at a time when progress was measured almost exclusively in terms of economic growth. But "master politicians" would be an equally appropriate moniker. Although neither Nelson nor Nichols ever ran for public office, they showed exceptional political skill in turning public improvements such as parks, boulevards, sewers, and streetcar lines to their advantage as private businessmen.

From a latter-day perspective, much of the wheeling and dealing involved in the creation of the Rockhill and Country Club developments smacks of hypocrisy and conflict of interest. Needless to say, however, that's not how Nelson and Nichols—or, indeed, most of their contemporaries—viewed their way of conducting business. I doubt if it never occurred to them that they might be perceived as doing anything shady or underhanded. By their lights, they were simply pulling strings and working the system the way every other forward-looking businessman did. After all, anyone could see that Kansas City's parks-and-boulevards system was an embryonic city plan in all but name.

Nichols and Nelson felt secure investing their money outside the city limits because the plan that Meyer and Kessler formulated in 1893, and its subsequent elaborations, guaranteed that others would eventually follow their lead. As a blueprint for development, the Park Board report had taken most of the guesswork, and much of the risk, out of the real estate game.

Parenthetically, there's one project I never got around to while I was doing the research for my book. I hoped to chart the successive phases of the city's parks-and-boulevards plan, from 1893 on, and map them over time against the land acquisitions and platting associated with the Nelson and Nichols developments. No one has ever done this, as far as I know, and I think it would be a revealing exercise. The development of the Country Club district has been painstakingly analyzed by Bill Worley and others, but comparatively little attention has been paid to Nelson's real estate activities. The evidence I adduce in *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds* suggests that he was an even shrewder businessman than contemporary critics gave him credit for being. If real estate development had been his life's work, the Rockhill district, instead of the Country Club, might have come to represent the "Heart of America" in the eyes of the world.

I'm sure many of you are familiar with William Wilson's classic study of the City Beautiful movement in Kansas City. His book documents, in captivating detail, the political machinations of Nelson, Meyer, and Kessler as they lobbied for the adoption and implementation of the 1893 Park Board report. Nichols arrived on the scene just over a decade later, fresh out of the University of Kansas by way of Harvard. His machinations have been less carefully scrutinized, but there's no doubt that he took his cue from Nelson. As a matter of record, he learned the real estate business almost literally at Nelson's knee. In a memoir written many years after the fact, Nichols recalled



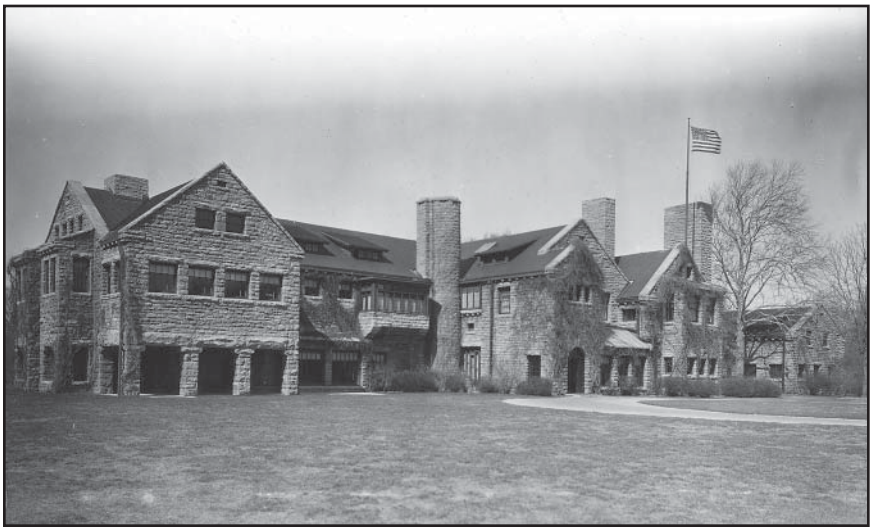
that when his company was just getting off the ground, Nelson "began to take an interest in our efforts and to my great surprise sent for me. Our properties were just southwest of Oak Hall, his luxurious home, and the Rockhill area of homes he was building at that time. He was an ardent believer in better residential areas, and better planned cities. He encouraged me greatly by telling me that anything would be better than the use of the land made by the pre-Civil War owners."


Pierce Street houses.

Nichols was an attentive student. Not only did he model his early Country Club subdivisions on Nelson's development (such as the Pierce Street houses shown in this photograph), he even appropriated the Rockhill name for several of them, although he claimed—probably disingenuously—to have been unaware that he was trespassing on Nelson's family escutcheon. Nichols was born in 1880, the same year the 39-year-old Nelson came to Kansas City from Indiana to launch the *Star*. In some ways, Nelson treated

the upstart developer like the son he never had. By 1908, Nichols had proven his ability, with a thousand acres under his control, a prestigious directorship in the Commerce Trust Company, and an $800,000 line of credit. A year later, the *Star* saluted the ambitious 29-year-old as an up-and-coming real estate "operator" who exemplified Kansas City's progressive, can-do spirit at its best. Nelson was signaling, in the clearest possible way, that he regarded Nichols as his designated successor at the helm of the City Beautiful brigade.

Yet for all their affinity, Nelson and Nichols differed profoundly in temperament and philosophy. Each had traveled to Europe at a formative time in his life, but under very different circumstances. As a thrifty college student, Nichols caught his first glimpse of the Old World from the deck of a cattle boat, explored it on foot and bicycle, and slept in hostels and small country inns. Nelson, as the proprietor of an influential newspaper, sailed in first-class staterooms, lived in high style in the center of Paris, and toured France and Italy in horse-drawn carriages attended by liveried footmen. These experiences naturally induced sharply contrasting visions of civic order. Nelson saw it as emanating from a benevolent autocrat like himself, whereas Nichols returned from Europe an apostle of the middle class and the free market. In Nichols's mind, solidly bourgeois home owners were the ultimate guarantors of civic virtue. Nelson, by contrast, preached home ownership for the masses, but in practice preferred to be lord of the manor.



William Rockhill Nelson's residence, Oak Hall, located at 45th and Rockhill Road, ca. 1915.

My father grew up almost literally in the shadow of Oak Hall and never lost his sense of awe and reverence for its redoubtable occupant. The Baron of Brush Creek, as Nelson was known by friend and foe alike, was popularly characterized as a feudal lord living among his tenantry in Rockhill. My grandfather, his close associate for many years, described the *Star's* publisher as part Renaissance prince, part robber baron, "a combination of Lorenzo the Magnificent and Jim Hill, with a dash of St. Francis, Nietzsche, and Oliver Cromwell" thrown in for good measure. Nelson displayed a strong paternalistic streak in his relations with both tenants and employees. It's characteristic of his autocratic nature that virtually none of the houses he built in Rockhill were for sale. Why anyone would want to buy a home when he could rent a perfectly good one was a mystery to Baron Bill. Nor did he see anything hypocritical about flaunting his position as a landlord even as the *Star* trumpeted the virtues of home ownership. Nelson prided himself on being a good provider. He spared no expense in adorning the Rockhill district with plants from his own nursery, quarrying limestone locally for the low-slung stone fences, and importing exotic squirrels to enhance the countrified setting in Southmoreland Park (seen at the right in the photograph below).

It was not Nelson but Nichols who enshrined home ownership as the focal point of the American dream. In his eyes, a man's home was more than a castle; it was a sacred investment too precious to

Looking south on Oak Street from Rockhill Road.

entrust to what he called "the private and selfish interest of the real estate speculator." To protect those investments, Nichols established a network of home owners' associations throughout the Country Club district. In addition to sponsoring such wholesome community-building activities as social and athletic clubs, Christmas caroling, and lawn and garden contests, the associations served as Nichols's eyes and ears, helping to ensure that homes and yards were well maintained and reminding residents of such neighborly courtesies as closing garage doors and reporting clogged sewers.

An early J.C. Nichols Company sign located at 52nd and Brookside Boulevard.

Participation in the home owners' associations was a civic obligation that conscientious Country Clubbers took as seriously as churchgoing and Rotary work. Nevertheless, Nichols soon realized that in the long run his campaign for neighborhood beautification and stability would never succeed unless the force of law was put behind it. From an early date, the Nichols Company filed deed restrictions on new subdivisions that governed everything from lot sizes and setbacks to house colors and architectural styles. In 1914, the company pioneered the use of self-renewing restrictions, including racially restrictive covenants, that remained in force in perpetuity unless a majority of home owners voted to repeal them. These restrictions were Nichols's insurance policy against the dreaded boom-and-bust real estate cycles that had laid waste to so many of Kansas City's older residential neighborhoods. Time has shown that that it was a singularly farsighted and effective policy.

Apparently, Nelson saw no point in imposing similarly comprehensive restrictions in Rockhill. He didn't need legal covenants to protect his investment; Baron Bill was a law unto himself. Nelson had another priceless asset as well: a bull-headed disregard for public opinion. He liked to say that the *Star* was the "Daily W.R. Nelson" and if people didn't like it, they could buy another paper. As a developer he adopted an equally cavalier attitude, often pouring huge sums of money into site preparation, landscaping, and infrastructure years before he had definite plans to build. Real estate was his favorite hobby and he could well afford to indulge himself. In his later years, the *Star* was bringing in close to a million dollars a year free and clear. Nelson invested that money when and where he chose, heedless of short-term returns, secure in the knowledge that the fortune at risk was his own.

Nichols, by contrast, was a team player by necessity. He couldn't afford to go it alone, as Nelson did. All the Country Club developments were highly leveraged; his company didn't show a profit on the books until nearly a decade after his first subdivision went up on the Missouri side. As a prudent businessman, Nichols was obliged to weigh every investment and expenditure—invariably involving other people's money—against its long-term profitability. The fact that in the early years he actually owned little of the land he was developing served merely to reinforce his instinctive caution. Ultimately, this pragmatic, conservative outlook proved more to the local business community's liking than Nelson's impulsive, shoot-from-the-hip style. As my grandfather might have put it, Nichols was the consummate practical idealist. He viewed city beautification less as a moral imperative than as a hard-nosed business proposition. To those who questioned his lavish expenditures on landscaping and public artwork in the Country Club district, he had a ready reply: "Beauty always pays in the end."

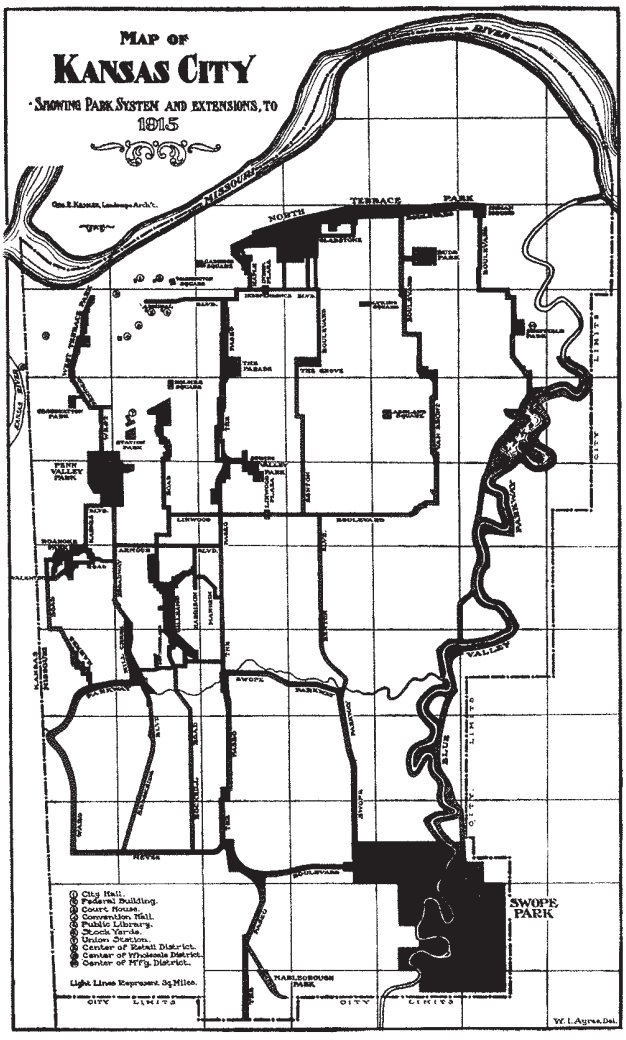
In some respects, then, Nichols and Nelson were two peas in a pod. In others, they were a study in contrasts, and those contrasts in turn mirrored the factions and ideological debates within the progressive movement itself. Some progressive reformers were interested primarily in the beautification of buildings and cityscapes. Others promoted fair elections and honesty and efficiency in government. Still others focused their energies on social justice and improving conditions among the poor. These multiple agendas overlapped but didn't always mesh. Many social activists, for example, criticized parks and boulevards as expensive luxuries that benefited mainly the already well to do. From the welfare reformers' perspective, the parks-and-boulevards system amounted to a large-scale slum-clearance project. For their part, the City Beautiful crowd was happy to leave welfare work to the private sector. Thus George Kessler lobbied hard for the

Children at Swope Park Lagoon, 1910s.

city to install playgrounds in his parks, but complained sourly when "expensive directors and sociological workers" were hired to supervise the children who used them.

These tensions would never be satisfactorily resolved and they made it all too easy for the enemies of reform to practice the tactics of divide and conquer. A case in point is the sad fate of the Board of Public Welfare, arguably the jewel in Kansas City's progressive crown. Established in 1910, with a crucial assist from Nelson's *Star*, the board was the first municipally funded welfare agency in the United States. It combined a traditional emphasis on self-help with a progressive commitment to activist government. Aiming to wean its clients off public assistance as quickly, efficiently, and inexpensively as possible, the welfare board provided a minimum of direct financial aid. Instead, it concentrated on offering needy citizens access to loans, jobs, housing, and free legal and financial advice. Such enlightened policies, the *Star* editorialized, enabled "the family of small means" to "share in the advantages of the city's progress."

Not for long, though. The Board of Public Welfare affected thousands of lives for the better and attracted national attention in the growing field of social work. Yet, as with so many of the progressives' utopian initiatives, human nature eventually got in the way. Greedy politicians began pressuring social workers to steer patronage to the Democratic political machine. The City Council, jealous of the welfare agency's hard-won independence, blocked appropriations in an attempt to bring it to heel. J.C. Nichols and other civic leaders attempted to broker a truce but failed to stop the acrimonious turf wars. By 1918, the city's highly respected chief social worker had been forced out and the Board of Public Welfare had become just another cog in the wheel of the municipal bureaucracy.



However much setbacks like this may have chastened my grandfather and his fellow progressives, they kept their sights fixed on the city of the future, confident that their cause was just and would prevail. In their eyes, the City Beautiful had come to stand for more than pretty parks, grand boulevards, and stable residential neighborhoods. It was emblematic of a hugely ambitious agenda of social, political, and economic reform, an agenda that could not be accomplished in a few short years. Speaking to a national group of realtors in the mid-1920s, Nichols elaborated on the concept of the City Beautiful as "the City Practical, the City Orderly, the City of Economy, the City of Efficiency, the City of Health, the City of Wise Plan," and "the City of Culture and Beauty." Such a city, he declared, would "stand the competition of time,... win its race for commercial supremacy, and hand down to future generations a heritage of unconquerable spirit, of imperishable human values, of undying influence for better life among its citizenry."

Nichols's stirring paean to the progressive utopia reminds us that in striving to make Kansas City more outwardly attractive, the City Beautiful reformers firmly believed they were

striking a blow for deeper systemic change. The old city, with its congested mishmash of ethnic groups and industrialized squalor, was indelibly associated in their minds with social strife and boss politics. The new metropolis—the glittering City Beautiful of salubrious hills and vales, winding boulevards, and spacious, well-appointed homes—was the showplace of progressive ideas. For forward-looking businessmen like Nichols, as for old-fashioned Jeffersonian democrats like Nelson, this idealized city of the future promised to create an environment in which the public and private sectors could work in harmony for their mutual enrichment.

Unfortunately, by the time Nelson died in 1915, the City Beautiful was already fraying at edges. If the underlying goal of the great parks-and-boulevards campaign had been to bind the city together both physically and socially, something had clearly gone amiss. By 1915, the system as originally envisioned was essentially complete. Some ninety miles of roadways and two thousand acres of parks had been constructed at a cost of more than $14.7 million. Yet, thanks in large part to Nelson's and Nichols's own residential developments, urban flight was accelerating rather than slowing down. More disturbing still, the city remained as divided as ever. Fault lines of class, race, and politics had deepened in the two decades it had taken to carry the Park Board's original plan to fruition. The once solidly white, middle-class neighborhoods of the north and east sides were slowly mutating in ways that comfortably middle-class progressives found deeply unsettling.

Under the circumstances, it's not surprising many progressive reformers put their grandiose dreams on the back burner and embraced the more modest goals encapsulated in my grandfather's philosophy of "practical idealism." As Kansas City's Democratic machine consolidated its power in the teens and twenties, the progressive movement came under attack on all fronts. The reformers' campaign for nonpartisan city government, one of Nelson's pet causes, bogged down in intramural squabbling. The *Star*, long a stalwart champion of reform, embarked on a more conservative course under the management of Nelson's successors, my grandfather among them. In Kansas City, as elsewhere, the "war to end wars" ushered in an era of conspicuous consumption (and equally conspicuous deprivation), reckless speculation, official corruption, and moral dissolution. The progressive agenda, it seemed, had not just been set aside, it had been ripped to shreds.

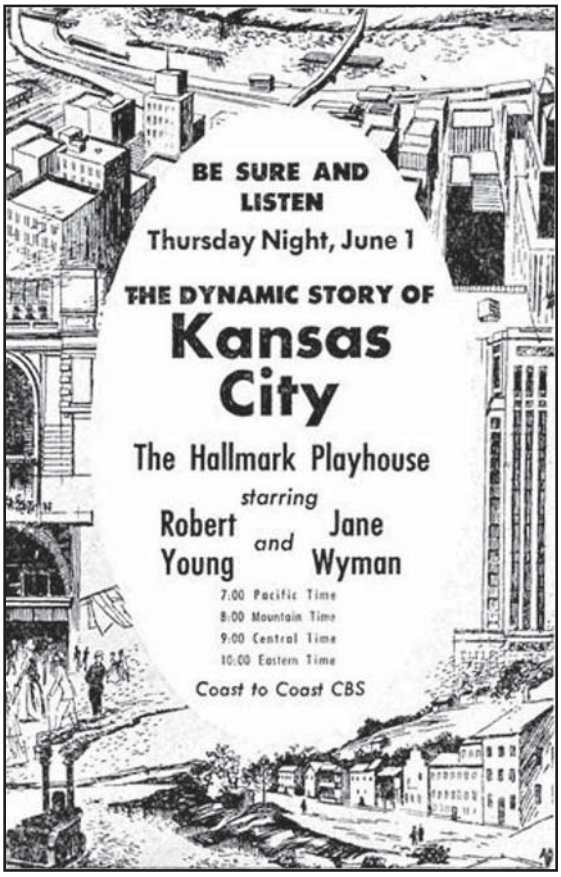
Thomas J. Pendergast (1873-1945). Jack Wally, photographer.

The "Kansas City spirit" so energetically promoted by the Chamber of Commerce had always been inseparable from the city's carefully cultivated progressive image. Paradoxically, that spirit rebounded in the 1920s and '30s under the freewheeling auspices of the Pendergast machine. After Boss Tom went to jail in 1939, however, much of the city's rambunctious vitality seemed to leech away. The new middle-class utopia—the sheltered suburban sanctuary depicted in Evan S. Connell's classic novels about Mr. and Mrs. Walter Bridge and their Country Club friends—was not notable for its progressive spirit. We have this on no less an authority than Harry S. Truman. In one of his famous letting-off-steam letters, written in 1950 but never posted, Truman pined for the good old days when Kansas City was "a progressive Democratic town." He added: "I don't think the so-called 'clean-up' boys have made one step that has improved conditions of the city. It seems since they have been in power about all they do is kowtow to the *Kansas*

City Star and then let the river take its course. It seems to me that the Kansas City spirit is dead, buried and forgotten."

By the time Truman wrote those words, many of the reforms that progressives of my grandfather's generation had fought for had been enacted into law. To a discouraging degree, however, the underlying problems the reforms were intended to correct remained as intractable as ever. Ironically, it was just at this juncture, the tail end of the Progressive Era, that the *Star* chose to formally anoint Kansas City as a "city of the future."

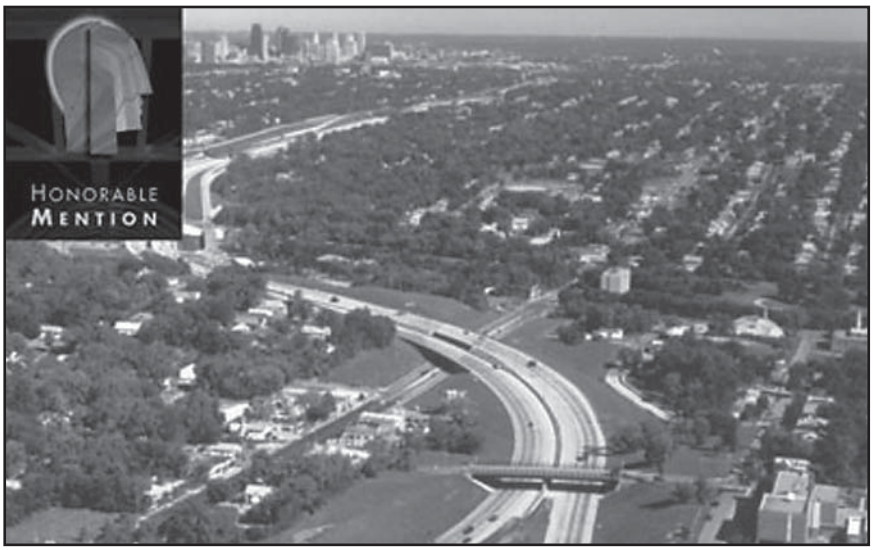
The historical account that my father and Richard Fowler wrote in 1950 captured both the city and the newspaper at the zenith of their fortunes. Serialized in the *Star* and brought out soon thereafter as a bestselling book, the saga of Kansas City was dramatized for radio on CBS's *Hallmark Playhouse* and broadcast coast to coast from the Music Hall, with Robert Young and Jane Wyman in the starring roles. *City of the Future* pictured a raw-edged but irrepressibly progressive City Beautiful marching toward its manifest destiny. In 1950, the paper's future seemed as bright with promise as the city's. To all appearances, the *Star* was more powerful, prestigious, and profitable than at any time in its history. Yet just two years later, agents of the United States Department of Justice set up shop in an air-conditioned office above the newsroom where they combed through business records dating back to the turn of the century. They were gathering evidence that the paper had violated the Sherman Antitrust Act—a key piece of Progressive Era legislation—by systematically stifling competition and monopolizing local advertising. By the time the case came to trial in 1955, even the *Star's* lawyers realized they were fighting a losing battle.



As the *Star* went, so went Kansas City—or so it seemed to some. By the 1950s, the city's short-lived heyday of progressive reform was a fading memory. Urban flight and suburban sprawl conspired to suck the lifeblood out of the old central city. Organized crime was once again on the rise. Railroad passenger traffic peaked after the war, then fell off sharply. Attempts to revive commerce on the Missouri River sank without a trace. The devastating flood of 1951 dealt the old industrial district a mortal blow from which it never recovered. Kessler's elegant boulevards, designed for leisurely pleasure driving, were becoming congested traffic arteries. Older residential districts suffered further from the merciless onslaught of interstate highways and high-speed expressways, the latest of which, the Bruce R. Watkins Drive, narrowly missed obliterating the block where my grandfather settled when he came to Kansas City a little over a hundred years ago.

Today, the area around 24th and Tracy is once again in the throes of change. Most of the older dwellings have succumbed to the ravages of time or the bulldozer. Here and there, urban homesteaders have staked their claims amid the empty lots and cul de sacs, much as their forebears did in the 1880s. On a recent visit to the neighborhood, I tried to imagine how my grandfather would feel if he were standing in my shoes. Would he look out across the ragged post-urban landscape and see only the wastage left behind by a century of failed utopian dreams? Or, practical idealist

that he was, would he see instead a once and future City Beautiful that is continually in the process of rebuilding and re-envisioning itself?



Aerial photo of Watkins Drive.

If there's one lesson I took away from writing *Boss-Busters and Sin Hounds*, it's that the choices society makes in the name of progress are never simple. And the long-term consequences of those choices are no more foreseeable to us than they were to the cheerleaders of the City Beautiful movement at the turn of the last century. We can create beautiful, vibrant, livable cities, but will anyone come to live in them? Can newer modes of commerce and communication ever replace the railroads and rivers that made early Kansas City at once a provincial cow town and a cosmopolitan crossroads? Are traditional concepts of community and civic life still relevant in the era of globalized culture and YouTube? Can the corporate-owned *Kansas City Star*, or for that matter any other civic institution, fill the time-honored role of the hometown newspaper in setting the public agenda, nurturing consensus, and nudging us along the forward path?

Kansas City isn't unique, of course. Every community in America, large and small, is wrestling with these existential questions in one form or another. If history is any guide, we'll still be wrestling with them when my ten-year-old daughter gets to be my age. With the benefit of hindsight, it's tempting to criticize the early progressive reformers and city builders for being more idealists than realists or more realists than idealists, depending on one's point of view. In many important particulars, William Rockhill Nelson and J.C. Nichols undoubtedly leave a great deal to be desired as role models. Still, no one who spends time getting to know them as I have can fail to come away impressed by the boldness of their vision, their expansive conception of civic life, their resilience in the face of disappointment, and their faith in the future—a faith at once starry-eyed and level-headed. When all is said and done, it may be that the progressive utopia is not dead, but only waiting to be reinvented.

Questions and Answers

Boutros: We have time for questions. Anyone?

Question: It seems that since the 1950s, Kansas City more so than its peer cities—more so than Minneapolis or Denver or Dallas which were its peer cities in the 1940s and 1950s—Kansas City lost its self confidence, which it is now regaining. What caused Kansas City not to grow, not to have the self confidence, not to have regenerating elites with great visions, as distinguished from Dallas, Minneapolis, Denver, and other cities?

Haskell: Wow. In a sense I spent about 400 pages in my book discussing that—although comparison are always to an extent invidious, aren't they? I deliberately cut my narrative short at around the 1950s because I felt I didn't have the perspective required to really do justice to that aspect of the city's history. So I am going to duck that question to a degree only because I want to approach it as I approached the book—from the backward end, from the historical perspective. In other words, what gave Kansas City the confidence to become the metropolis it was, and maybe still is in many respects? I no longer live here and cannot pretend to have been close to the city for a good 20 years. That distance has been a necessary adjunct to writing the book and to seeing things in a more or less objective fashion, or at least a different fashion than I was brought up to see them. But it also means that I have been detached from the city and there are certainly gaps in my knowledge.

Kansas City in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it seems to me, was in a very formative state. Ethnic groups had not coalesced. The city had not yet grown in population to the extent that it was factionalized as highly as it would later become. They had not tried so many things to see what would work and didn't work. We can learn from our failures, but we can also learn not to experiment because certain things have been proven not to work. Certainly that was the mantra of the disillusioned progressives, like my grandfather, in the '30s and '40s—they had been there, done that, and it didn't work. It was time to try something else, but they weren't sure what. The role the *Star* played in this saga is, I think, absolutely critical. (I say that with some humility because, of course, my family played some part in it.) I think if we are looking today for a revival of a progressive mindset on the local as well as the national levels, we're going to depend to a considerable degree on opinion leaders, shapers of opinion, who are in short supply these days. We don't tend to respect the same sources of authority and opinion that we did in the past. The *Star* was as reviled as it was respected, but peopled paid attention to it.

What I call the short-lived progressive era in Kansas City, which lasted from about 1900 right up to the First World War, depended on the leadership of William Rockhill Nelson and the *Star* to a degree that I never anticipated when I embarked on this project. Nelson himself became thoroughly radicalized in that period. By the time he died, the feudal lord that so many people caricatured him as being was so far from reality that people like my grandfather felt he had gone way too far to the left, and, in fact, was going soft in the head. They felt they had to sweep all this under the carpet

and resurrect him as a kind of pillar of society. As a result, you got a very sanitized and selective telling of Nelson's life. I like to speculate what would have happened had Nelson survived another 10 or 15 years. He was not all that old when he died and could easily have lived into the postwar era. It would have been very interesting how he would have navigated some of the treacherous currents that undermined Kansas City's progressive consensus. I don't think I have answered your question, but I have talked long enough. [Laughter.]

James Kemper: Harry, I know your book ends before this, but I wish you would comment. I was born in 1921 so I was in high school in the 1930s and I can remember seeing WPA workers down on Brush Creek with shovels. I think something most people don't realize is that all politicians at the time, like Pendergast and Nelson, if you can call him that, were operating on kind of a welfare system. My grandfather was quite active in politics and we used to travel with him, and when we went someplace his favorite game was to go locally and to try to get someone a job through Washington. That was just the way they operated. In the 1930s with the Depression, people absolutely didn't know what to do. When Roosevelt came in I think people like Nelson, if he had lived, or Nichols, or anyone else, were desperate. Roosevelt kind of turned the old boss system for a while into a welfare system and that's the reason he was so very popular for a while. And then, of course, the war came along, and just like with our present administration, when a war comes along people don't think about anything else. Actually the war made everybody prosperous again. It seems to me that this was almost enviable.

Haskell: Herbert Hoover tried to navigate – unsuccessfully, as most people of the time thought—the transition from a completely hands-off, laissez faire economy to one that was more centralized and highly organized. There has been a lot of scholarship recently that shows that Hoover anticipated many of the New Deal programs. He just couldn't bring himself to take the final step; he was such a cautious man that the experimental spirit of FDR was totally alien to him. Ironically, it was Harry Truman, perhaps the most partisan Democrat ever to occupy the White House, who brought Hoover out of retirement and put him to work assessing the efficiency of the federal government. My grandfather's reaction to Roosevelt was very interesting. Up until about mid-1936 he was welcome at the White House. Jim Farley and all these people were saying nice things about him, and, as you know, Harry Hopkins was coming to town touting the administration's great public works program. But at some point around the second half of FDR's first term there began to coalesce a stubborn opposition to some of the more controversial programs of what is often called the Second New Deal. Grandfather, who traveled a lot in Europe, commented to one of our ambassadors over there—which relates to your point about the city bosses—about Jim Farley, who was both FDR's postmaster general and his campaign manager. Up to 1940, Farley wanted to run for the White House himself and was hoping that FDR would get out of his way, which of course he didn't. So Farley was maintaining very good relations with Pendergast even as FDR was doing his best to distance himself from the boss. Grandfather told the American ambassador to Germany, "I suppose for the foreseeable future the only way for the government to function is by hauling in the big-city bosses like this." This was part of his "practical idealism," I suppose. You can call it a defeatist attitude or you can call it a realistic attitude—it had elements of both. Certainly Pendergast saw himself as running a patronage machine and a welfare machine—he was very explicit about that.

Boutros: If some of you wish to pursue this further, I might remind you that Lyle Dorsett, who authored a book entitled *The Pendergast Machine*, also wrote *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the City Bosses*.

Question: In growing up hearing stories that your father told and then in researching this later did you find different points of view between the hard facts and the family stories?

Haskell: Well, just about everything I thought I knew was turned on its head, and that was wonderful. That's why I decided when I set about researching the book that I had to start from the beginning, work my way though, and try to see the world as my grandfather and his contemporaries saw it. My sisters, a couple of whom are in the audience today, remember my grandfather, who died two years before I was born. From them and my mother I had an image of my grandfather as a starchy Republican who forced you to wear nice white gloves when you visited his house. For my mother, who came from a socialist background, my grandfather's moderate Republicanism was something she could not stomach in any way. But then I began to understand how Grandfather was seen by people who knew him as a young man, the kind of aspirations that he had, the background that he had in the 19th century. For instance, he was a strong proponent of Henry George's Single Tax. When Kansas City's parks and boulevards plan was first proposed, a lot of people saw it as a radical income-redistribution scheme because it was going to tax the wealthy, in the form of special assessments, to produce benefits for the city. The people who formulated the plan were very specific that it was based on George's idea, which my grandfather had supported since his student days at Oberlin College.

The radical history of Kansas City has never received the attention it deserves. Kansas City labor history, in particular, is just beginning to be studied. Mother Jones came here in the 1890s and helped set up the Appeal to Reason, the leading organ of the socialist movement, in an old shop downtown. People like her were coming in and out of town all the time. There were socialist workers clubs here. In the first decade of the 20th century, the radical labor element worked very much in the open, with a certain amount of support from the establishment, as embodied by the people who read the *Star*. I had never heard anything about that, nor had I caught wind of William Rockhill Nelson's unmistakable radical tendencies. While I was writing my book, a wonderful woman told me about her grandmother, who had worked for Nelson as a housemaid, and her grandfather, who had been his chauffeur. This was around 1911 or 1912, in the last 3 or 4 years of Nelson's life. The woman's grandfather was a French socialist and very outspoken, very politically active. Nelson liked him so well that he insisted on riding in the front seat with the chauffeur, talking politics wherever they went.

In my book I tell the story of Nelson's meeting Helen Keller when she came to Kansas City in 1913. I happen to have a letter from Keller, which is the reason I knew this story was waiting to be unearthed. Somebody threw away a lot of my grandfather's papers at some point, but I had a very small sampling, enough to fill maybe three manila folders. Among them was a letter from Keller written on the train in the Dakota Territory as she was chugging her way to Boston, saying, "I am enclosing the article that Col. Nelson asked me to write about blindness in newborns." It is kind of hot stuff because she is talking about venereal disease. Keller said, "Most papers won't print it and I'll understand if you decide not to print it. Just tell me and I will ask my people in Boston to make other overtures." When I began to look behind that story, I found that Keller had come to the *Star's* newsroom and met Nelson, who by that time was almost blind himself. Many years later she recalled telling him about blindness in newborns caused by venereal disease, which nobody would talk about and therefore was not something that the public health authorities were addressing. She said tears came down Nelson's face as she spoke. As I reflected on that, I thought, "She was blind and he was practically blind. How could she have known that he was crying?" The only way she could have known was by touching him. In all the other accounts, and I think I have read just about everything that has been written about Nelson, there is no evidence that anybody, including his daughter, ever touched him. They never talk about that—he was not a touchy-feely guy.

By the end of Nelson's life something profound was happening to him, something that was expressed politically and in his civic views and in the way the *Star* evolved. There was an editorial writer named Dante Barton who seems to have been the token socialist on the *Star*. He certainly was Nelson's pal because he was the one Nelson deputized to show people around the paper when

big-name visitors came. One of them described Barton as a sour-faced socialist with a big heart, or something like that. There is very little other documentation about him except that he was closely aligned to Frank Walsh, Mary Walsh Abbott's grandfather, who was a well-known labor attorney and Nelson's closest friend and closest legal advisor. If you look at anything that has been written about the *Star* since 1915, Walsh's name is almost never mentioned. In the *Star's* official obituary of Nelson, Walsh was mentioned once in passing in connection with the Board of Public Welfare. He had helped found it, along with William Volker and Jacob Billikopf, and was such a key figure that he could not be ignored. But after Nelson's death people like my grandfather considered Walsh a radical who had pulled Nelson in the wrong direction, and so they effectively wrote him out of the history of both Kansas City and the *Star*.

Interestingly, at the end of his life Grandfather had something to do with the Volker Fountain—the Carl Milles fountain on Volker Boulevard. As chairman of the memorial committee, he got to know Milles very well. Because my mother was Swedish and Milles was Swedish, they hit it off, and my father got to know him too. To make a long story short, I went to Stockholm and looked at their correspondence in the Milles papers. I discovered that Mom and Dad had both talked with Milles about Frank Walsh. It was obviously something they didn't feel they could do while Grandfather was alive, because Walsh was persona non grata. I should add that in the centennial history of Kansas City that Dad wrote with Dick Fowler in 1950, Walsh is never mentioned. Roy Roberts was still very much in control then, and he would have nothing to do with commemorating a left-winger like Walsh.

Walsh is well known to American historians and is a major figure in the story I tell in the book. He comes across in some ways as William Rockhill Nelson's conscience and in some ways as a kind of slippery character—a wonderful man who had a great heart but still managed to work effectively within the existing political system.

Time to stop. Thank you.

WHMC-KC

The Western Historical Manuscript Collection, a joint collection of the University of Missouri and the State Historical Society of Missouri, contains primary source materials for research and welcomes use by scholars, students, and the public. Our network allows for the full resources of the Collection—the holdings of all four branches in Columbia, Kansas City, Rolla, and St. Louis—to be available to researchers throughout the state.

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Questions about the use of or donations to the Collection should be directed to David Boutros, Associate Director of the Kansas City office. (816) 235-1543; WHMCKC@umkc.edu.

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Cover photo: Taken in the slums of Kansas City, MO, ca. 1912. This image is from a collection of large glass negatives documenting conditions addressed by the Kansas City Board of Public Welfare. Some of the images may be found in the annual reports of the Board which are rich with details of the Progressive Movement efforts in Kansas City. *Kansas City Photo View Company Photographs (KC0460), WHMC-KC.*

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