Forgotten Kansas Artist

ADAM ROHE

by John M. Peterson

Today the name of Adam Rohe, a Lawrence resident for more than fifty years, is completely unknown to Kansans, even to Lawrence residents, although copies of three of his large posters appear in several places in the city. From the 1870s well into this century his decorative work, ranging from business signs and stage scenery to cartoons, paintings, and shaving mugs, could be found in Lawrence, elsewhere in Kansas, and in neighboring states. He also was a pioneer, or at least an early practitioner, of using agricultural products as the chief decorative element in designing exhibits and ornamenting buildings for fairs and expositions.

The chief purpose of this article is to review briefly Rohe’s life and his career as a decorative artist. A secondary goal is an attempt to shed some light on how Adam Rohe, one of those unusual individuals who from his earliest days was driven to express himself by drawing and painting, was able to support himself and his family with his artistic talents in an area and age when such endeavor was not likely to be well rewarded financially.

Adam Rohe was born in Fayette County, Indiana, on July 11, 1844, the first of twelve children of Anton and Margaret Vance Rohe. His father was a farmer who also is said to have had a rural tavern called the Buena Vista on a road near a toll gate. From his very early years Adam had an artistic bent; he began drawing as a small child and, even though no record exists of any formal instruction, he moved on to painting in his early teens. His father is reported to have disapproved of Rohe’s interest in art, probably because with his large family he felt his son should pursue work more likely to enable him to contribute to the family income.

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1. Rohe’s obituary in the Lawrence Daily Journal-World, March 27, 1923, gives 1845 as his birth year, but family records, his tombstone, and military and pension records all list 1844. When he enlisted in the U.S. Army in Cincinnati in 1861, he was a month short of being seventeen but gave his age as eighteen. Adjutant General’s Office, War Department to Commissioner of Pensions, December 19, 1914, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; Adam Eiever to unknown party, April 3, 1891, Jane Perkins (Rohe’s granddaughter), private collection, New York.

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In his teens Rohe gave clear evidence of having an adventurous as well as artistic spirit. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, he immediately attempted to enlist. As he was only sixteen, local recruiters turned him down. This rebuff only increased his determination to join the army and, having no other means of transport, he walked to Cincinnati, some sixty miles southwest, where he was accepted by the Guthrie Grays, a volunteer unit noted for the many newspaper and professional men among its members. In the process of incorporating the many volunteer units into the regular army structure, the Guthrie Grays became part of the Sixth Ohio Volunteer Infantry Regiment.2

During the more than two years Rohe served in the Sixth Ohio, the regiment participated in several minor conflicts and three major battles. On September 19, 1863, at the bloody and confused engagement at Chickamauga, Georgia, he was taken prisoner by Confederate forces. For the next four months he was confined in Confederate prisons, but on January 15, 1864, he escaped and in a little more than a month was able to make his way back to the Union lines. After a month’s leave he returned to duty and was given an honorable discharge on June 23, 1864.3

One would think being captured in battle and escaping from a military prison would be enough adventure for a youngster of nineteen, but not so for Rohe. About September 1, 1864, he enlisted in the Union navy as a substitute for a Cincinnati merchant. He served on several ships in the Mississippi squadron on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers, most notably on the U.S. monitor Neosho.4

3. Adam Rohe, “Declaration for Invalid Pension, March 6, 1897,” Records of U.S. Pension Office, Record Group 15, National Archives, hereafter cited as U.S. Pension Office. Some other records give slightly different dates, but all agree on his capture at Chickamauga and on the date of discharge.

4. Adam Rohe to unknown party, April 3, 1891. Hiring a substitute was a common and legal practice during the Civil War. A monitor was a heavily armored war vessel having a low freeboard and one or more revolving turrets.

ably the more settled life aboard ship gave him some time to practice sketching. Through some contact of which there is no record, his ability and his presence aboard the Neosho came to the attention of Harper's Weekly, a leading illustrated magazine of the day. Between December 31, 1864, and May 2, 1865, Harper's published five of Rohe's sketches. Only the first of these is a battle scene—the Neosho engaging three Confederate shore batteries in an artillery duel while escorting twenty-three transport vessels down the Cumberland River. Three others are river scenes—a flood scene in Mound City, Illinois, a view of nearby rural "Happy Hollow," and a sketch of General George Thomas's headquarters at Eastport, Mississippi. His fifth drawing depicts the burning of the Black Hawk, the flagship of the Mississippi squadron.

Rohe received his honorable discharge from the U.S. Navy on July 31, 1865. After a brief stay in his Indiana hometown, Connersville, he moved to Litchfield, Illinois, a railroad center fifty or so miles northeast of St. Louis. Little trace of his stay there has been found, but it appears certain that he learned his seemingly irrepressible urge to draw and paint could help him make a living if applied to such practical matters as painting signs, decorating store windows, and making posters. In 1872 Rohe moved from Litchfield to Lawrence, Kansas. The only clue as to why he did so is that in Litchfield he had become acquainted with Elias Summerfield, son of early settlers in Eudora who arrived there in 1857 and moved to Lawrence about 1864. Like Rohe, Summerfield had lived in Litchfield from 1865 to 1872. In that year he moved to Lawrence where he soon became deputy county treasurer. It seems probable that Rohe learned about Kansas and Lawrence from Summerfield and may have visited the state before deciding to move there.

When Rohe arrived in 1872, Lawrence was a town of about eight thousand persons. It had recovered in large part from Quantrill's raid of less than nine years earlier; the main street, Massachusetts, again was lined with buildings replacing those the raiders had burned. The University of Kansas had been open since 1866, its large new building would be ready for partial occupancy by December, and its first small class of college graduates would receive their degrees in June 1873. Distant transportation of goods and people largely was in the hands of the Kansas Pacific Railway for connections to the east and west and the Leavenworth, Lawrence and Galveston line, which ran southward to Ottawa and other points. Orlando Darling had begun the first serious effort to dam the Kansas River to provide water power for mills and other industrial plants. Many businesses were prospering, and construction was booming with a bank, four churches, and a number of large residences under way.

Arriving in Lawrence at age twenty-seven, Rohe probably had some plan as to how he would make a living, and possibly some experience in the field, as he soon set himself up as a sign painter. By 1873 he had a shop on the south side of Henry (now Eighth) Street. In his first few years in Lawrence he may have painted a few houses or business premises when nothing else was in the offering, but in the fifty years he was listed in Lawrence directories only once, in 1883, did he list himself as a "house and sign painter." In other years he is listed most often as a "sign painter;" but occasionally he is identified as an "artist and sign painter" or as a "sign writer and artistic painter."

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7. The prosperous era, which began with rebuilding after Quantrill's raid, continued until 1874 when local factors combined with the national economic decline to bring on a depressed period. See Kenneth A. Middleton, Manufacturing in Lawrence, Kansas 1854–1900 (master's thesis, University of Kansas, 1940), 22: David Diary, Lawrence, Douglas County, Kansas: An Informal History (Lawrence, Kans.: Allen Books, 1982), 137–39, 156; Katherine Greene, "Post Quantrill: The Reconstruction of Massachusetts Street, Lawrence, Kansas, 1863–1866" (unpublished research paper, University of Kansas, 1989), 8–12; Weekly Kansas Tribune (Lawrence), January 2, 1873.
8. City Directory of Lawrence for 1873–4 (Lawrence, Kans.: Corbett, Hoye and Co., 1873), and directories published in subsequent years through 1923.
Sign painting provided a rather steady employment even when the economy was not booming. Almost every place of business from banks to saloons needed a sign over the street or across its front to attract would-be customers. Some signs were no more than neatly arranged lettering, but others were highly decorated and might feature a painting relating to the product or service being sold. Changes and replacements also were in frequent demand due to normal weathering, storm damage, location moves, or changes in name, ownership, or type of store. Windows and glass door panels often bore the name of the company or proprietor in a decorative design; Rohe became known for his black and gold designs painted on glass. Other painters in Lawrence during the 1870s and 1880s painted signs, but until 1886 all are listed in the city directories as painters or as house and sign painters except for the one carriage painter the town supported.10

We know from a daughter’s memoir that Rohe’s real desire was to paint landscapes, city scenes, and even portraits; but in Kansas in the late nineteenth century, making a living with that kind of art was very difficult even for the few who had academic training and contacts with the art world. A University of Kansas professor called Rohe a “stray from the Renaissance.” Upstairs in the family’s apartment he had placed portrait transparencies of Rembrandt, Rubens, Raphael, and Michelangelo over the glass transoms in the hall. Below in his workroom the top shelf held casts of Greek and other statuary, while his “treasure desk” was full of old art books and classical prints.10

It is evident that Rohe did not remain unknown for long, at least in some circles. In December 1874, a little more than two years after he arrived in Lawrence, he married Alice Park, a woman ten years his junior and daughter of John and Jeannette Park. Park, an insurance agent who also wrote for newspapers and magazines, was a fellow veteran of the Ohio Volunteer Infantry but had served in a different regiment. The Rohes first set up housekeeping on Rhode Island Street but later moved to the 700 block of New Jersey. Early in 1876 a local newspaper noted that the couple had produced “another original model”—their first daughter who was named for her mother.11

By the mid-1870s advertisements were appearing in a Lawrence newspaper for “A Rohe, Sign Painter and Pictorial Draftsman,” and his work began to be mentioned occasionally in the local press. Rohe was said to have fashioned a “pretty small sign for J. Warne, the hardware man” and to have produced signs and decorations of “rare artistic merit,” which showed he was “a wit as well as an artist.” Late in 1877 he was hired to do some decorative work in the new University of Kansas building, later named Fraser Hall, which still was being finished inside. The Lawrence Standard praised Rohe for his beautiful and artistic work but failed to describe it.12

A few months later Rohe opened what the Daily Tribune called “another public picture gallery.” Although no specific description of the gallery was provided, it was said to have an advantage over previous ones because it was in several locations rather than all being at one place. The Tribune noted that the “display at the post office is the finest and shows an originality in design that is enviable.” Most likely it was Rohe’s plan to sell some of his drawings and paintings by displaying them at different places around Lawrence. If successful, it might free him

9. L. Stenhouse and W.A. Sanders, Stenhouse and Sanders’ Lawrence City Directory, 1875–8 (Lawrence, Kans.: 1875); J.J. Johnson and P. McKinney, Johnson and McKinney’s Annual City Directory, 1879 (Lawrence, Kans.: H.A. Cutler, 1879); Lawrence City Directory, 1883 (Lawrence, Kans.: Lawrence Publishing Co., 1883); Lawrence City Directory, 1886 (Lawrence, Kans.: P.T. Foley and Co., 1886); Green and Foley’s Lawrence City Directory, 1888 (Lawrence, Kans.: P.T. Foley, 1888).

10. Alice Rohe, untitled, undated memoir of the Rohe family in Lawrence about 1884, probably written in the 1920s, Perkins Collection, hereafter cited as “Rohe Family Memoir.” All names except for immediate family are pseudonyms.


12. Kansas Tribune, November 4, 1875, January 13, 20, 1876; Lawrence Standard, February 1, 1878.
To make a living as an artist, Rohe sought commissioned work for his talents. His creations included theatre curtains, portraits, and etchings, such as this 1884 New Year’s Day card for the Lawrence Boat Club.

from doing all his artistic work on order for someone else. Probably it was unsuccessful as no further mention of “picture galleries” has been found.  

Along with routine business signs and window decorations came occasional larger orders such as a sign for the Merchants’ National Bank, which Rohe claimed would “knock the spots off anything in St. Louis.” Other local orders in the early 1880s ranged from New Year’s Day cards for the Lawrence Boat Club to large posters for special events. Rohe took great pride in the shaving mugs he decorated individually for the town’s business and professional men. Each design in black and gold contained a miniature scene representing the owner’s vocation, in addition to his name embedded in scrollwork. The mugs were kept in an open-faced cabinet in the barber shop that Rohe said might be the only art gallery where he could exhibit his work. A friend called it a gallery of fine miniatures.  

Rohe’s first-known poster order was for a pair publicizing the Western National Fair at Bismarck Grove on September 19–22, 1882. During the previous three years the fairgrounds had been greatly improved and numerous buildings had been constructed to supplement the first building, a tabernacle, which was 115 feet in diameter and boasted a fifty-foot dome. Rohe’s poster, composed of three panels, provided a comprehensive view of all the facilities at Bismarck including the tabernacle, exhibition hall, other display buildings, a race track and barns, rail facilities including a station, and groves of trees, picnic areas, and lakes.  

The second poster publicized the fair management’s attempt to attract large crowds by scheduling a boating regatta on the Kansas River. A champion oarsman had been hired to superintend the regatta, and crews from St. Louis, Detroit, Pawtucket, and other places had been talked into participating. Rohe

14. Ibid., March 21, 1878; “Rohe Family Memoir.” The Boat Club’s New Year’s Day card for 1884 was a small sketch in blue and black.  

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again created a three-panel arrangement. One depicts the
ty with four-oared shells competing on the
river, spectators lining the banks and in rowboats,
and a small steamer for news reporters following the
competitors. A second panel presents a view southward
down Massachusetts Street with impressive
buildings on each side and many wagons, carriages,
and horseback riders on the street. The third panel
features a panorama of Lawrence’s industrial plants
along Sixth Street and the Kansas River.16

In the late 1870s the Rohe family moved again,
this time to the south side of Henry Street where
Rohe’s shop had been since 1873. In 1883 Rohe
purchased the building that housed his family up-
stairs and his shop below. Before the end of the year
a second daughter, Margaret, was added to the Rohe
household, undoubtedly to the great joy of the par-
ents, as their second child, Fred, had died as an infant
two years earlier.17

With a wife and two daughters to support it
seems likely that Rohe either had found, or was seek-
ing, additional sources of income. One possible
source is revealed by his daughter Alice in her de-
scriptions of the family’s life in Lawrence in the
1880s. She tells of her father working on a theatre cur-
tain featuring a pastoral scene of ancient Greece to be
installed in a theatre not in Lawrence and possibly
not in Kansas. As a small child she admired it very
much and was very disappointed when her father
signed it with someone else’s name. He explained to
her that a Mr. Dixon of St. Louis had the reputation
and contacts that secured orders from many places
and that he passed some of these jobs to Rohe but insis-
ted they go out under the Dixon name.18 From her
recollection it seems these jobs may have come in
fairly often over a period of several years. Even
though he was not credited for this work, Rohe en-
joyed using his imagination and occasionally in-
dulging his love of classical landscape.

Rohe received other orders for scenic art. Alice
mentions the care he gave to a large painted frieze of
figures from the Acropolis requested by the Greek
department at the University of Kansas. An 1885 new-
paper item remarks that Rohe was “doing a good
deal of work for parties in other parts of Kansas....
Recently he has completed a drop curtain for an
opera house in one of the leading towns in Sumner
County. It is a thing of beauty and will well pay any
of our home readers to drop in and see it before it is
sent to the parties ordering it. The canvass depicts a
scene in Holland, and it is a lively and fresh repre-
sentation of some very pretty scenery.” Local theatric-
ical events also used scenery painted by Rohe. In one
instance he was said to be “painting some beautiful
new stage properties which will be used in putting on
the stage at the opera house Shakespeare’s Midsum-
mer Night’s Dream.” Another local production, Iolan-
the by Gilbert & Sullivan, featured Rohe’s scenery
which a newspaper described as “splendid.”19

Another indication that Rohe considered himself
an artist and was accepted as such locally can be
found in the history of Lawrence art organizations.
As an outsider, a tradesman, and a person with no
connection with the University of Kansas, it would
not be surprising if he had been ignored by the pro-
fessors, leading businessmen, and their wives who
dominated the local art scene. One organization, the
Lawrence Art League, was formed at a meeting at
Professor James Canfield’s home the evening of Sep-
tember 8, 1884. B.W. Woodward, a leading business-
man, was elected president, Mrs. Canfield became the
vice president, and Professor Frank O. Marvin, dean
of engineering at the university and well-known local
etcher, took the position of treasurer. The league’s
goal was “to cultivate taste and talent for art,” thus
appealing to collectors such as Woodward and to

16. On this poster Rohe’s name appears near the lower left corner on
the surface of the street near the curb.
the Register of Deeds, Lawrence, Kans.; B. Jean Sneedeger et al., Complete
Tomistone Census of Douglas County Kansas, 2 vols. (Lawrence, Kans.: Dou-
glas County Kansas Genealogical Society, 1987), T-130.
18. “Rohe Family Memoir,” A review of St. Louis directories in the
eyear 1880s revealed no trace of a Mr. Dixon in theatrical furnishings or of
any firm advertising theatrical scenery; likely the city’s name has been
disguised.
19. “Rohe Family Memoir,” Lawrence Tribune, August 7, 1885;
Lawrence Daily Journal, April 20, 24, 1891, October 19, 1894.

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artists like Marvin. Rohe was a member of the league, subscribed to its fund for an art building, and had a work in the league’s June 1886 exhibition. Possibly he exhibited the portrait in oil of General Ulysses S. Grant, which he had painted for a local memorial exhibit at the time of Grant’s death in August 1885.20

A second art organization, but one much different in purpose and scope, was the Lawrence Sketch Club, which held its initial meeting on January 7, 1884. Said to have been the first organization of its kind in Kansas, its stated goal was to assist members in improving their works in oil, watercolor, and etching. Membership was limited to ten males, meetings were scheduled every two weeks, and, at least in the beginning, each member was expected to bring an original sketch to each meeting. Charter members were Frank O. Marvin, Adam Rohe, John T. Moore, and H.L. Schaum. F.M. Benedict and George E. Little joined a few months later. Rohe was an active member and frequently an officer, serving as president in 1888 and as treasurer in 1890.21

In the 1880s Rohe entered another field of applied art, that of designing exhibits and decorating exhibits and buildings for fairs and expositions. The latter half of the nineteenth century not only was the heyday of the large international exposition, largely inspired by the great Exposition of 1851 in the Crystal Palace in London, but this era also witnessed considerable proliferation in the United States of everything from national expositions to county fairs. Many of the larger shows were primarily celebrations of technical developments in engineering and industrial production, but most also gave much attention to agricultural developments including new crops, new livestock breeds, and new farming machinery and techniques.

In 1876 the Centennial Exposition, the first great fair held in the United States, opened in Philadelphia. The Kansas board of centennial managers appointed Henry Worrall, a widely-known Topeka artist, to coordinate designing and preparing the exhibits to represent Kansas. Worrall’s displays featured agricultural products such as fruits, grain, and grasses. The grain exhibit involved entire plants or stalks in cases, shocks attached to the walls, seed heads and stalks draped along girders, and tubes or bottles filled with individual kernels.22 In 1881 Atlanta was host to the Cotton States Exhibition, and again Worrall was selected to design exhibits for Kansas. Three years later, however, for the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition scheduled to open on December 1, 1884, in New Orleans, the Kansas commission appointed Adam Rohe as the artist in charge of designing and constructing that display. Because Worrall seemed the logical choice, the reason Rohe was selected now is only a matter for conjecture. It may have been that Worrall was too busy with book illustrations and drawings for Harper’s Weekly to devote time to another fair. Or possibly members of the commission thought a designer outside Topeka should have a chance to demonstrate his abilities. Of the few other designers and artists in Kansas at the time, Frank Marvin may have been the best known, but he was a busy university professor; Adam Rohe was known in Lawrence and beginning to build a reputation in other parts of the state.23

Rohe began work on his Kansas exhibit early in the fall, but it is unlikely that he finished by opening day. In general the states and other exhibitors had trouble meeting the exposition schedule, and visitors had little to see when the fair opened early in December; a month later, however, many of the pieces had

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20. Lawrence Gazette, September 11, November 15, 1884; Lawrence Tribune, June 11, 1886; ibid., August 14, 1885; Lawrence Weekly Journal, June 9, 1887.

21. Lawrence Journal, Special Edition, December 25, 1890; Kansas City Journal, January 6, 9, 1884; Evening Tribune (Lawrence), December 31, 1887. Of the Sketch Club members listed only Rohe made his living from art-related work; Marvin was a college professor, Moore was a pharmacist and drugstore manager; Benedict was an insurance agent, Little worked in a bank, and Schaum was a store clerk and later the proprietor. Etchings and drawings by Marvin and Little are in several collections, but none by Rohe have been found.


fallen into place. A leading New Orleans newspaper on January 2, 1885, praised the Kansas exhibit as one which, using “the rudest material” with great skill, made “the most pleasing and beautiful objects . . . in the most unexpected manner.” The centerpiece of the Kansas exhibit, a statue of Ceres, the Roman goddess of agriculture, towered over the area on a thirty-foot pedestal. The twelve-foot statue was crowned with a chaplet of wheat heads and carried a sickle and sheaf of grain. “The pace is easy and graceful, the drapery classic in form and falling in natural lines and curves . . . in the approved Grecian mode.” When approached more closely “this statuesque figure would not be taken for a bundle of straw, which it really is.” The pyramidal pedestal was covered “with white and yellow and purple grain and straw laid off in panels and wrought into forms of mosaic and patterns of parquetry. Great shaggy heads of buffalo as the centers of large medallions stud the side of the pedestal . . . This work which attracts universal attention, was the work of Prof. A. Rohe.”

A fair visitor from Lawrence said that Rohe’s appointment to arrange the exhibit was “in itself a guarantee of faithful and efficient work.” He went on to mention that the commissioner from Minnesota had invited Rohe “to assume the entire charge of the Minnesota exhibits.” Exactly what Rohe did for Minnesota was not announced. Probably his main job was to pull together existing disparate elements into an overall design and supervise its installation, as later he was asked to oversee reproduction of much of the exhibit for another fair. In any case, Rohe and his daughter Alice did not return to Lawrence from New Orleans until February 27, a little over a week after Kansas Day at the exposition. His success with the Kansas exhibit and his work for Minnesota brought him recognition outside Kansas, and it led to further commissions from states to the north.

The middle and late 1880s were boom times in much of Kansas, including Lawrence. Settlers in search of cheap, tillable land, as advertised by rail-


25. Ibid., January 22, March 5, 1885. A Lawrence observer, “M.S.,” claimed that Rohe “has made himself a national reputation as a designer, and Kansas has reason to be proud of her exhibit”; ibid., February 5, 1885.
roads and other promoters, poured in from northern Europe and many eastern states. Lawrence industry expanded in response to the growing population and the developing reliable power source when dam construction problems were solved. The University of Kansas progressed beyond a primarily high school status to offering a preponderance of college courses. The number of degrees granted rose from thirty-two in 1880 to forty-two in 1885 and fifty-seven in 1888. The government school for Indian children, Haskell Institute, opened in 1884.26

W ith business booming and his favorable reception at the New Orleans fair, Rohe began to be commissioned for design and decorative work in new fields and new places. In 1885 he was asked to take charge of reproducing much of Minnesota’s New Orleans exhibit for display at the Illinois State Fair. In late August he left for Minneapo-

lis where he spent several weeks. In 1887 he was called to Caldwell, Kansas, by the Rock Island railroad to decorate several cars in recognition of completion of the line to that point. Three trainloads of cattle were to be “handsomely cartooned” for a special run to Chicago accompanied by a group of Kansas cowboys. That same year Rohe was appointed to the decoration committee for a ten-car special excursion from Kansas City to Lawrence. A few years later he spent time in New Mexico on an assignment for the Santa Fe.27 Presumably he obtained other jobs from the many railroad lines in Kansas and nearby states.

In 1887 or 1888 Rohe produced a drawing with a theme and content unlike any of his other known works. Its title is “South American Condor and Congress of Vultures,” and it combines cartoon elements with realistic drawing. The scene is a dark and gloomy field in which a dead donkey is being picked to pieces by a condor and a flock of vultures. The donkey is labeled “W.F.M. Co.” and tags or “quota-


27. Lawrence Tribune, August 28, 1885; Lawrence Gazette, September 3, 1887; Lawrence Weekly Journal, June 2, 1887; Daily World (Lawrence), March 29, 1892.
In the 1880s and 1890s the Rohe family continued to live in the Henry Street apartment. Although their living quarters were far from palatial, Mrs. Rohe and the girls seem to have participated in the usual social life of the period including out-of-state visits to family and friends, lawn parties, and club memberships. In the 1890s Mrs. Rohe was active in the Round Table Club, a study group primarily of business and professional men’s wives.

The 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus, was a major event in the history of the United States. It attracted millions of visitors from all over the world and showcased the technological and artistic achievements of the time. The Kansas State Pavilion was one of the highlights of the fair, featuring exhibits that demonstrated the state’s agricultural, industrial, and cultural contributions.

In the 1890s, Kansas was a state on the rise. Its economy was diversifying, with increasing industrial activity and a growing population. The state was known for its wheat, which was a major export, and its use of new irrigation methods to transform arid land into fertile fields. The Kansas State Legislature was also active, with debates on issues such as education, labor rights, and state finances. The state also had a vibrant cultural life, with theaters, museums, and educational institutions that contributed to its identity.

28. Allan G. Bogue, Money at Interest (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), 108-13, 181-82; Evening Tribune (Lawrence), November 26, 1887; The President of the Western Farm Mortgage Company, F. M. Perkins vs. J. B. Watkins—Libel Suit for $10,000 Damage (Lawrence, Kan.: J.B. Watkins and Co., n.d.). A drawing by Rohe much different in content and mood had been displayed in Lawrence in 1882. It spoofed the benefits that proponents claimed would flow from the approval by Lawrence authorities of a Union Pacific proposal to build a rail line down Vermont Street, a principal residential street, from the Kansas River bridge to the south city limit. In the drawing, houses, hotels, theatres, and other business premises up to fifteen stories tall line Vermont Street while several nationally known politicians and businessmen are gathered near the railway station. Unfortunately no copy of this drawing has been found.

29. Lawrence Gazette, August 9, September 6, October 4, 1888; Lawrence Daily Journal, August 1, 1891; Round Table Club, yearly program booklets for 1897-1910. In group pictures in Souvenir History of Lawrence, Kansas, 1838 (Lawrence, Kan.: E. F. Caldwell, 1898), Mrs. Rohe appears in the Round Table Club, Alice in the Ventura Club, and Margaret in the St. Cecilia Music Club.
of America’s discovery by Columbus, was the first major international exhibition in the United States since the Centennial Exposition of 1876. On September 23, 1892, the board of managers of the Kansas Exhibit appointed Rohe to decorate the Kansas Building. This appointment, a plum so far as recognition and prestige were concerned, undoubtedly was based on his success with the state exhibit at New Orleans.

Unfortunately Rohe had been appointed by a board of governors named by the Republican administration in power in September 1892 but replaced two months later by the People’s Party administration headed by Lorenzo Lewelling. On March 9, 1893, Governor Lewelling named an entirely new board, which appointed one of its members, H.H. Kern, to decorate the Kansas Building. When that board made its report to the governor in December 1893, the entire short report of the first board was incorporated, except for the sentence mentioning Rohe’s appointment. As was to be expected, Kern was given full credit for the design and decoration of the pavilion and most of the exhibits, and the board assured the public that “H.H. Kern... whose reputation as a designer and grain decorator was established long before the World’s Fair was thought of has fully justified Governor Lewelling in appointing him to the position.”

How much Rohe contributed to the Kansas exhibit design or the decoration of the Kansas Building cannot be determined. However, in March 1893 the Lawrence Journal expressed its belief that his plans were well along and that the new board “seems determined not to allow any of the work already done to endure. Mr. Rohe is one of the best men for the work that can possibly be secured and as there is none who can surpass him in the decorative art, he should be kept at home and allowed to carry out the plans he has almost perfected.” Possibly Rohe was the recipient of the $133.65 paid to an unidentified decorator that the first board reported. Some of his work may have been taken over by the second board without credit, which would explain why its report was so defensive concerning the reputation of its chief decorator/board member and why Rohe’s name and the fact that he had ever been appointed was deleted.

When the appointment was made, Rohe was busy elsewhere practicing a new aspect of decorative art—using farm produce to decorate the outside of fair or exhibition buildings. As previously noted such material had been used in decorating large areas within a building as early as 1876. So far as is known, however, these products had not been applied to the entire exterior until 1887 in Sioux City, Iowa, where a group of local boosters decided that if St. Paul, Minnesota, could have an Ice Palace, Sioux City could have a Corn Palace. A new building was erected and decorated on both the inside and outside with designs formed of corn sheaves, stalks, and ears and parts of other agricultural plants. The first Corn Palace was a resounding success, attracting one hundred thousand visitors including President Grover Cleveland. Deeming their experience to be an artistic as well as a financial success, the Sioux City boosters built a larger building in 1888 with a tower 110 feet high. In 1889 and the next two years, the Sioux City boosters built a new and larger temporary building each year. All went well until 1891 when bad weather reduced attendance and the promoters suffered a sizable loss. Floods in 1892 and the beginning of a nationwide

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30. Proceedings of the Board of Managers, Kansas Exhibit, World’s Columbian Exposition (Topeka: Crane and Co., 1893), 7, hereafter cited as Board of Managers. Rohe’s appointment was not based on his personal record as a Republican. The person who drew the Watkins cartoon for the leading Democrat in Lawrence could not have received preference based on his status as a Republican. Rohe’s name has not been noted in any context that would indicate he supported a political party.

31. Report of the Kansas Board of World’s Fair Managers, 1893 (Topeka: Hamilton Printing Co., 1894), 4, 14, 25. The Republican board’s replacement undoubtedly is a reflection of the bitterness between the two parties that climaxed in the so-called “Legislative War” of January and February 1893. Henry H. Kern had assisted in designing fair exhibits but this statement greatly exaggerates his experience up to 1892. See Perl W. Morgan, ed., History of Wyandotte County and Its People, 2 vols. (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Co., 1911), 2: 1014, which claims he was assistant in charge of the Kansas exhibit at Philadelphia, won first prize for Kansas in Alabama (meaning Atlanta), and was in charge of exhibits at New Orleans, none of which is accurate.

32. Board of Managers, 14; Lawrence Daily Journal, March 21, 1893.
economic slump in 1893 put an end to the corn palaces of Sioux City.  

Surprisingly, the same year Sioux City closed its corn palace business, Mitchell, a town of about three thousand population in South Dakota, revived the enterprise. On July 31, 1892, some local businessmen agreed to boost Mitchell in its competition with other area cities by assuming the corn palace project. To distinguish their effort from its predecessor they named it the Corn Belt Exposition. The next day fund raising began, and very shortly plans to construct a one hundred-by-sixty-six-foot structure were approved. Local farmers donated one thousand bushels of corn to help decorate it, and L. O. Gale, one of the effort’s leaders, hired “Mr. A. Rohe of Lawrence, Kansas, to come to Mitchell to decorate the new building.”

The new building, constructed in record time, evoked traditional concepts of a castle or palace with numerous engaged circular towers topped by sharp-pointed cupolas. Given the short time he had to work on the project, Rohe had to limit his exterior design to a variety of geometrical forms such as alternating bands of dark and light ears of corn spiraling around the towers and patterns of squares and triangles surrounding central emblems on the flat areas. Rohe also helped decorate the building’s interior, but no specifics were recorded.

From the beginning the materials used to decorate the corn palaces in Mitchell were limited to products raised in South Dakota. In general the Sioux City palaces served as models, and most likely Rohe saw photographs of their designs. In addition to creating the designs to cover all exterior and some of the interior, he also was responsible for selecting the materials used and for drawing, or at least supervising the preparation of, the templates which were chalked on paper and tacked in place to guide the persons who actually attached the corn and other materials to the surfaces of the building. Cut or whole corn ears of different sizes, several colors, and many shades had to be selected and blended to provide the desired visual effects, as did the stalks, seed heads, and leaves of grass, cane, flax, and other materials.

The 1892 Corn Belt Exposition was effective in attracting attention to Mitchell, the corn belt, and the entire state of South Dakota. Most remarkably, the organizers profitted despite the dismal economic situation and the competition of publicity and preparations for the Chicago Fair. With this successful beginning, the Mitchell boosters repeated the event in 1893 and made it bigger and better. The building was enlarged and a drive to increase subscriptions, publicity, exhibits, and low-cost transportation began early in the year. Rohe again was engaged to design both external and internal decorations. On August 30 he left Lawrence for South Dakota, where he remained for a little more than a month.

Rohe’s task was considerably larger and more complex than in the previous year. The structure contained increased wall space and new gables with balconies. Rohe’s designs were more varied than in 1892; he used scrolls, ribbons, and plant forms and even a scene of a camel caravan crossing a desert. The walls, ceilings, pillars, and balconies inside were similarly decorated. The Exposition Souvenir asserted that “Mr. Rohe has been just as successful in getting up a striking and handsome interior as he was with his work on the outside and . . . every one admires and praises the wonderful results he has accomplished.”

In 1894 and several succeeding years a severe drought, combined with the increasingly depressed economic conditions, caused the event to be canceled. In 1900, with higher farm prices and favorable crop prospects, the people of Mitchell again voted to host

37. Johnson, Cornbelt Exposition Souvenir, 4–5; Lawrence Daily World, October 8, 1893.
a Corn Belt Exposition. Rohe had not been forgotten and was asked to plan the building’s decorations. His design was less intricate than in 1893, probably because time and funding were restricted.  

No exposition was organized in 1901, but it was resumed in 1902 and has been held every year since. In 1902 Mitchell was one of several South Dakota cities competing to be the state capital. To the Mitchell boosters this contest presented a great opportunity, and thousands of dollars were raised with the help of the local railroad to make sure the Corn Belt Exposition was better than ever. Rohe was engaged to enlarge, remodel, and decorate the building, and he created and installed one of his most elaborate and colorful designs.  

For the next several years Rohe continued to design the decoration of the “corn palace” as it commonly was called. In 1904 with the capital contest still underway, the exposition managers signed John Philip Sousa’s band as their headline entertainment event to ensure a large attendance. The resulting national notice and a more secure financial position guaranteed continuation of the corn celebration for a number of years. Rohe’s 1904 design featured many intersecting circles, his favorite Greek key motif, and even an optical illusion. Some commentators consider it his most harmonious and beautiful design.  

In 1905 he constructed a new and larger building of much the same castle/palace style but with onion-shaped domes. The celebration’s name was changed to “The Corn Palace” thus bringing the official name in line with its longtime popular name. Rohe adapted his designs to new shapes and surfaces, but he continued to rely on geometric forms into which he worked emblems, various symbols, and floral shapes.  

Rohe also decorated the corn palaces of 1906, 1907, and 1908, but by 1909 he was sixty-five years of age and was beginning to have health problems. The annual trip to South Dakota may have become a burden to him, and the exposition’s management knew

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38. Schutt, The Corn Palace Story, 8.
39. Ibid; Goin, World’s Only Corn Palace, 1; Lawrence Daily World, August 25, 1902.
40. Schutt, The Corn Palace Story, 8, 10; Goin, World’s Only Corn Palace, 2; Lawrence Daily Journal, August 30, 1904.
they would need a new decorator before long. It may have been by mutual agreement that in 1909 they took that step, and Rohe's annual trip to Mitchell became a thing of the past. His place as decorator of the first palace and all its successors until 1909 was not forgotten and was recorded in the exposition's archives, photographs, and publicity pamphlets.41

While his work on the corn palaces during the 1890s and 1900s brought Rohe's name and talents to the attention of many residents of Kansas, South Dakota, and nearby states, his main sources of income continued to be sign painting, window decorating, painting theatre backdrops and scenery, and fashioning posters, cartoons, and drawings commissioned for special occasions. In the 1890s he entered the field of book illustration when John Speer, a veteran Lawrence newspaperman, wrote a biography of Senator James H. Lane which was published in 1896. Three of Rohe's drawings depicting significant events in Lane's tempestuous life appear in the book.42

In 1904 Rohe prepared one of his best-known posters to publicize the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the settlement of Lawrence. The Lawrence Semi-Centennial, a week-long festival held in early October, featured meetings, parades, exhibits, and the decoration of stores and other buildings. Proof sheets of a three-color poster featuring Rohe's drawings were presented to the publicity committee on September 10. The design contrasted Lawrence in 1854 and in 1904 using views of an old log cabin and the new county courthouse. A local newspaper called the poster "a credit to the skill of the artist."43

In the late 1890s Rohe began to have physical problems, which made him eligible for a Civil War veteran's pension. Beginning in 1897 he was granted a small pension that by the time of this death in 1923 had been raised to fifty dollars per month.44 Mrs. Rohe's health declined about 1910. Although

42. John Speer, Life of James H. Lane (Garden City, Kans.: 1896), 140, 165, 295.
43. Lawrence Daily Journal, September 10, 1904.
44. Invalid Pension Claim, Adam Rohe, #39655, approved March 29, 1902. Pension Claim, Adam Rohe, Act of May 11, 1912, approved January 26, 1915, U.S. Pension Office. By 1904 both of Rohe's daughters were sup-
only in her early fifties she was not strong and did not survive an operation in August 1913. After her death her husband continued to live in Lawrence on Henry Street and to carry on as a sign painter and decorative artist, but seldom did he enter new ventures or seek out-of-town work. He saw his daughters and grandchildren occasionally, and his granddaughter recalls getting letters from him decorated with small pencil drawings. His work was still appreciated in Lawrence; a resident from 1906 to 1915 remembers watching Adam Rohe “do those beautiful classics, those signs on glass in gold leaf! A true artist!”

World War I changed the lives of many Lawrence residents but did not transform the city itself, and Rohe’s life went on much as it had before the war. He continued to list himself as a sign painter and was glad to work on a sign or window decoration, but he considered himself mostly retired. One morning in February 1923 he was found unconscious in his apartment. Dr. Edmund Keith, who revived him, said he had been overcome by a gas leak and probably had been out for several hours. Although Rohe recovered to some extent he never completely overcame the effects of the gas. He died a few weeks later, on March 24, and was buried in Oak Hill Cemetery.

Although Adam Rohe was not considered a major artist even in Kansas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he was one of the very few during those years who made a living for himself and his family almost entirely as a decorative artist. Despite being entirely self-taught, his work in a number of fields was well-received, and he was a pioneer in the art of decorating fair exhibits and buildings. Much of his work was ephemeral in nature and only three of his posters have been on exhibit in Kansas in recent times. Ironically, his name can be found in current publications in Mitchell, South Dakota; not so in Kansas. Here Rohe’s fascinating life story—until now—was contained only in the pages of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Kansas newspapers.


46. Lawrence Daily Journal-World, February 8, 9, 14, March 26, 1923.