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KANSAS HISTORY

REMEMBERING THESE MARBLE HALLS
This Grand Structure

by Robert W. Richmond

settled into a long and intimate relationship with the Memorial Building in the fall of 1932, having been first introduced to it in the preceding decade as a history major at Washburn University. Since that day in 1932 when I returned to Topeka to join the Society’s staff as state archivist, this classic building has undergone innumerable changes. For thirty-six years I was involved with the entire structure in one way or another—every public area, every storage area, every nook and cranny—and I watched each alteration made to keep up with the times.

To the ordinary observer of the building’s exterior little has changed during the past fifty years, but the interior is a different matter. In 1932 the interior appeared much as it did when the building opened in 1914. A major portion of the second and third floors was occupied by the Grand Army of the Republic memorial auditorium with its considerable seating capacity on the main floor and its balcony, entered from the third floor lobby. The auditorium was impressive with its marble, its portraiture, its flags, and its huge north windows, but the acoustics were terrible and the seats were uncomfortable. As Edgar Langsdorf wrote in his centennial history of the Society, the auditorium was “too large for small meetings and too small for big ones.” However, on occasions such as Kansas Day it was used for sizeable gatherings despite its drawbacks.

The building contained the original office spaces for veterans’ organizations of the Civil and Spanish-American Wars, and their auxiliaries also were there although the numbers of the people who used them had dwindled noticeably. The Civil War remnants, such as the Daughters of Union Veterans, had offices in the west end of the second floor, and the offices for the Spanish-American War veterans along with the American Legion (which had been granted space following World War I) were on the first. Ultimately a portion of the American Legion’s operations moved to the second floor, and eventually they acquired a building of their own.

Society staff peacefully coexisted with those “outsiders,” but they frequently cast covetous eyes toward the space as collections and staff expanded. The entire fourth floor was devoted to the museum with its eclectic and often irrelevant collection that ranged from truly valuable Kansas artifacts to a giant sea shell, a stuffed reindeer, a Chinese rickshaw, and the amazing Gosch bird collection. Interpretation of the museum’s collection was nonexistent. Everyone on the staff took his or her turn at supervising the museum on Sunday afternoons and, if I remember correctly, my initial museum experience was on the first Easter Sunday after my arrival at the Society. Needless to say, visitation that day was minimal and my boredom was maximal.

Robert W. Richmond retired in 1988 as executive director and treasurer of the Kansas State Historical Society. He is an alumnus of Washburn University and among his published works are Kansas, A Land of Contrast (1989) and Kansas: A Pictorial History (1993).
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All areas of the Society were open six days a week, and a limited staff allowed ample opportunity for Saturday work. Eventually we went to half days on Saturdays, and as the staff grew we worked on alternate Saturdays. The archives and manuscripts staff from 1952 until 1957 consisted of Edgar Langsdorf (who also was assistant secretary), Lela Barnes (also the Society’s treasurer and office manager), a part-time Washburn student, and me. In addition to our specified duties we wrapped publications for mailing and occasionally engaged in janitorial work in our own areas. The librarian’s office also was on the first floor, and the librarian, then Helen McFarland, served as the curator of the photograph collection. We had no in-house photographic capability; if a patron needed a print someone had to take the original to a commercial firm for duplication.

The Memorial Building was long on ornateness in the 1950s but short on comfort. It had no air conditioning, and the copper-framed windows leaked. On a hot day one could raise the windows, but in the archives area that only meant that one’s perspiration mixed with dust. The alley on the north side of the building has always been a natural wind tunnel, and more often than not it was better to be only damp rather than muggy. I remember sticking to both my desk top and whatever papers I might have been working with. At times the museum had to close because temperatures on the fourth floor rose well above one hundred degrees.

The building was altered dramatically in 1960 and 1961 as we prepared for the state’s centennial. The old auditorium space was replaced by the present auditorium and the areas that in 1956 housed microfilm storage, the microfilm reading room, the reference room, and the publications offices. What in the 1950s had been the administration office area was remodeled at that time as a museum gallery. And we acquired air conditioning, which improved life considerably. New windows and doors came too, and the building no longer whistled on windy days.

One common feature of library stack areas in the first half of the twentieth century was glass floors. The Memorial Building was no exception. The newer archives stacks had steel floors, but the rest of the stacks’ floors were glass. A common bit of light-hearted staff commentary involved the possibility of the glass breaking while one of us was standing on it. One day it happened and one of our student employees was the victim. Fortunately he was not hurt, but we walked very carefully in the stacks from that time forward until the floors were reinforced.

Two other regions in the building housed printed collections and an amazing quantity of dust. The west end of the third floor, commonly referred to as the library annex, and the west end of the basement were poorly lighted and visited only when there was a pressing need to retrieve or deposit some duplicate publications. At one time Kirste Mohem, who preceded Nyle Miller as Society secretary, maintained an auxiliary office of sorts in the annex. For a long time the receptacles of that office remained in the room’s southeast corner.

Speaking of offices, Nyle used the secretary’s office in the northwest corner of the first floor only on state occasions. He preferred to work in the partially partitioned space that was then in the map room and had a “scenic” view of the south wall of the Santa Fe building.

The interior changes of the Memorial Building between 1952 and 1958 are almost too numerous to mention. The spaces originally occupied by the Spanish-American War and the American Legion organizations were taken over by the map and photograph collections, then used for manuscript storage, and finally for historic preservation staff. Administrative offices migrated from the first to the second floor in the early 1960s, and the archives, manuscripts, maps, and photographs have expanded far beyond what any of us could have imagined forty years ago.
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Microfilming, which initially had only two employees and was housed in a small space behind the freight elevator in the basement, has greatly expanded during the past three decades. With the move of the museum to its new building in 1984, the archaeology department acquired the fourth floor and the space it had needed for years.

There have been smaller changes. The rest rooms for example: somewhere along the way—I don’t remember in what year—the historic overhead flush tanks with their chain pulls were replaced by more modern equipment. Fixtures, which were themselves artifacts, gave way to plumbing progress.

For all its earlier shortcomings the Memorial Building was a great place to work, and its architectural grandeur cannot be denied. As a researcher since retirement, I still enjoyed working there although I found some things more complicated than they once were. However, I managed to adjust, and the collections remain as valuable to me now as they were when they formed a part of my everyday working life.

I will miss going to Tenth and Jackson. The Memorial Building has been a large part of my professional life, and I hope the next occupants of this grand structure treat it with the respect it deserves.
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In the 1950s the Memorial Building was long on attractiveness and short on comfort. But for all its shortcomings its architectural handsomeness cannot be denied. Pictured here is the second floor lobby, the marble walls and floors, intricately designed statuary, and carved ceilings found throughout the building, form a grand and beautiful structure.