Remembering These Marble Halls

Reflections on the Memorial Building

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This Grand Structure
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In the mid-1930s my dad's job took him to Topeka for most of one summer. So our entire family—my mother, my two sisters, my brother, and myself, a young teenager—moved from Marion to Topeka to be with him. We occupied a house in the two hundred block of West Thirteenth Street, about where the Topeka YWCA is now located.

Before long we visited the new Topeka High School, and we children got library cards at the Topeka Public Library, then located on the northeast corner of the state capitol square. As a family we visited Topeka parks, especially the Reinish rose garden and the zoo. We took part in special events such as the Arthur Capper birthday celebration on July 14 in a North Topeka park. Trolley rides were free for those going to the park, where everything was free—rides on a Ferris wheel, rides on a merry-go-round, and ice cream.

We visited the capitol many times, climbed to the top of the dome along the steep winding stair, and ventured out on the windy walkway above the dome. As yet no John Staat Curry murals adorned the capitol walls, but the Lincoln and the Pioneer Mother statues were on the grounds. At that time downtown Topeka had few other state buildings besides the capitol—I knew that the Masonic building across Tenth Street from the capitol housed the State Highway Commission and east of it was the State Printing Plant. And at the corner of Tenth and Jackson Streets was the Memorial Building, headquarters of the Kansas State Historical Society.

During that summer I spent many hours in the historical museum, on the fourth floor of the Memorial Building, an impressive structure to me. At times I took my sisters and brother, all younger than me. Most historical items were arranged in large glass cases, similar to cases then used in department stores. Historical materials were at various distances from the viewer. I'm sure I had at least twenty-twenty vision at that time, which was needed to read every label placed on each displayed artifact—probably very few of the museum items were then in storage. Some artifacts had nothing to do with Kansas, such as a shingle from George Washington's barn, a huge sea shell from the South Pacific, and elaborate scrollwork used in furniture. But many were Kansas items, including a large display of stuffed birds; Old Sacramento, a cannon involved in the territorial wars; an old Smith automobile; an airplane hanging from the rafters; and silk produced experimentally on a Kansas farm. I also examined the large display of Civil War regimental flags, housed on the first floor in a large vertical case that could be opened like leaves of a book. I uncovered many fascinating delights that summer at the Kansas State Historical So-

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Among the many exhibits to the Memorial Building that impressed Socolofsky during his childhood summer in Topeka were the Old Sacramento cannon, Civil War regimental flags, and the Great Smith automobile, shown here on display to a group of young viewers.

In the 1940s Socolofsky returned to the Memorial Building and shifted his interest from the museum exhibits to the library and manuscript and archives departments where he began research for his master’s thesis.
joined the Kansas State Historical Society as a life member—ten dollars seemed a large amount to pay at the time. As a member I periodically received copies of the Kansas Historical Quarterly, which could be exchanged at the end of the year for a bound volume. The Society’s annual meetings came on a Tuesday in October, and soon I attended these as a member of the board of directors. Attendance was small at these annual business meetings. The newspaper reading room, which had a hard-tile floor, was emptied of its tables, and the space was filled with chairs for the officers, who sat with their backs to the card catalog and faced the small audience. This arrangement was not much better than the one for another occasion I attended that was held in the large imposing marble-clad GAR auditorium on the second floor of the Memorial Building. The acoustics were terrible—no speaker could be understood easily. The luncheon, held in conjunction with the annual meeting, often was served in the Florontine Room of the Hotel Jayhawk and had a large turnout. There the Society’s president gave a historical presentation, which later was published in the Quarterly.

In the era following World War II, the museum displays began to change. Some artifacts were incorporated into period rooms. The clutter, so evident in earlier years, was disappearing—a larger portion of the museum collection was placed in storage. Items that had a common theme were placed together in specially constructed standing cabinets to tell a specific Kansas story. In more recent years it became evident that the museum could no longer properly exhibit its artifacts on the overcrowded fourth floor of the Memorial Building. As a result, in 1984 the museum moved to a new and larger facility on the west side of Topeka.

The additional space afforded by the Kansas Museum of History was of great benefit, but there is infinite value in having all of the departments of the State Historical Society in close proximity. This is now possible with the new Kansas History Center where all areas of the Kansas State Historical Society again are geographical neighbors. I certainly will miss the Memorial Building as the Society’s headquarters, but will fondly remember my many associations with this grand monument over the past sixty years.
All Society members received copies of the Kansas Historical Quarterly (left), which was published from 1931 to 1977. In 1978 it was succeeded by Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains, which members receive today. Both publications are valuable resources for students of Plains history.

The Society's annual meetings were held on a Tuesday in October, when interested members would gather in the newspaper reading room on the first floor of the Memorial Building. Here a small crowd listens to a speaker at the 1953 annual meeting.

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