Olathe, Kansas, World War I monument, by the popular artist John Paulding.
Over the past fifteen years, what is variously termed cultural, collective, or social memory has become an increasingly popular concept among historians and literary scholars, especially those working in the field of American war studies. How, scholars of military memory have asked, do Americans at a given moment in history collectively remember a past conflict? Who controls such memory? Who contests it? And how and why does the memory of a specific war change, as it so often does, with the passage of time?

Studies that explore such questions in connection with the American Civil War, the Second World War, and the Vietnam conflict now abound. However, comparatively little scholarship has focused on American memory and World War I—or, more specifically, on the cultural significance of World War I memorials erected in the 1920s and 1930s. At first glance, the desire to memorialize American soldiers, especially
the war dead, and to celebrate the nation’s role in the Allied victory seems to have been universal during the interwar years. While the federal government spent millions on gigantic monuments in France and Belgium, communities across the nation planted memorial trees and gardens, erected statues of soldiers, named streets and bridges after local casualties, placed commemorative plaques inside courthouses, and built schools, hospitals, and meeting halls in honor of the fallen. If judged by the number and scale of the memorials that it inspired, World War I produced an outpouring of pride and patriotism unparalleled in American history.

However, a closer look at war memorialization during the 1920s and 1930s reveals growing public apathy, intense disagreement over the form that memorials should take, and widespread uncertainty over the meaning of American participation in World War I. Economic, political, and ideological turbulence often lies hidden behind placid facades of concrete or bronze that honor American soldiers of the Great War. To illuminate this turbulence, this article focuses on the more than fifty World War I monuments (statues, victory arches, obelisks, and so forth) that survive in Kansas communities—links to another time that often pass unnoticed even when standing in plain view. In addition, it examines functional commemorative sites, so-called living memorials such as American Legion halls (each of which bears the name of a Kansas casualty during World War I), high schools, and college student unions constructed in the memory of Kansas soldiers. Three questions guide the analysis. First, where do World War I community memorials, as represented by the dozens still standing in Kansas, fit within the larger history of American military commemoration? Second, what do the specific histories of these memorials—the details of their design, funding, and construction—tell us about collective memory of World War I between 1919 and 1941? And, third, what presence (if any) does World War I have within American culture today? As we will see, Kansas World War I memorials reveal much about the conflict they commemorate (although seldom how their creators intended or anticipated), and they perhaps tell us even more about the cultural dynamics of war commemoration itself.

As the variety of memorials in Kansas demonstrates, the interwar decades represent a transitional phase in the history of American war commemoration. Some forms of public remembrance dating from the nineteenth century persisted during the period and, in some cases, became more popular than ever. At the same time, however, new forms emerged, many of them in response to the ambiguous nature of the conflict whose memory they sought to define. For example, in 1921 the nation honored an unknown American soldier, a commemorative gesture borrowed from the other Allied powers and unprecedented in American history. Because “he could take on any identity,” and thus functioned as a “void,” the nameless cadaver enshrined at Arlington became, through its essential ambiguity, the

Meticulously crafted by an unknown sculptor, this stone doughboy forms part of the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial in Wilson.

perfect symbolic focal point for Americans seeking to come to terms with the war, but uncertain of its ultimate meaning. The interwar period also saw an explosion of interest in functional memorialization, a concept that predated World War I, but skyrocketed in popularity after 1918. Massive civic projects, such as the Victory Plaza in Indianapolis (a complex that includes the national headquarters of the American Legion) and the Liberty Memorial in Kansas City, Missouri (now the National World War I Museum), offered functional space as well as war-related statuary. And, as we will see, other examples of utilitarian remembrance—memorial hospitals, auditoriums, and the like—became prominent structures in towns and cities across the nation, including dozens in Kansas.

Commemorative statuary, the memorial style of choice for American communities following the Civil War, had its last hurrah between 1919 and 1941. Statues of soldiers and other nonfunctional monuments erected after 1945 would be much fewer in number—and far different in flavor. With his distinctive soup-bowl helmet or wide-brimmed campaign hat, four-pocket tunic with stiff collar, hobnailed ankle-boots, puttees (wrap leggings), and typically heroic stance, the World War I infantryman who stands atop numerous monuments constructed in the 1920s and 1930s represents the continuation of a commemorative style linked to the American Civil War. Seven of these stone or bronze doughboys still brave Kansas weather each year. An unknown artist of considerable talent created the limestone infantryman who stands rigidly at attention atop the Soldiers, Sailors, and Marines Memorial in Wilson. The other six statues are all by either John Paulding or E.M. Viquesney, nationally renowned sculptors whose war-related works were mass produced (in Viquesney’s case, by American Doughboy Studios) and purchased for commemorative purposes by various organizations in towns and cities across the United States.

The latter’s best-known statue, entitled Spirit of the American Doughboy, is currently on display, typically atop a pedestal that lists the names of local servicemen (the living and the dead), in 139 different communities nationwide, including three in Kansas—Axtell, Parsons, and Oakley. Viquesney enthusiast Earl Goldsmith, whose “Spirit of the American Doughboy Database” provides a wealth of information on this World War I icon, suggests that more Americans have seen Viquesney’s signature work (albeit without necessarily remembering that they have done so) than any other American sculpture except for the Statue of Liberty.

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Regardless if this claim is true, the statue was ubiquitous during the interwar period—and not only in outdoor public space. American Doughboy Studies also produced a popular twelve-inch-tall version, perfect for a veteran’s mantle piece or desktop, as well as a model that supported a light bulb and lamp shade. Few commemorative artifacts from the period were as aggressively marketed. Advertisements for Viquesney’s soldier statue, both the full-scale and the miniature versions, appeared regularly in The American Legion Monthly, a periodical that reached thousands of former soldiers from the mid 1920s through the outbreak of World War II, and they employed an apparently effective mixture of redundancy and hyperbole. One advertisement from April 1927 describes the studio’s product as “authentic, accurate, and 100 percent perfect,” and includes an endorsement from the American Legion Commander, who praises the “amazing realism” of Viquesney’s work.4

Despite its manufacture’s claims of exact verisimilitude, Spirit of the American Doughboy represents an uneasy blend of down-to-earth realism (signaled by the vernacular “doughboy” in the title) and romantic idealization (“spirit”). Indeed, Viquesney’s statue is a particularly vivid example of the aesthetic awkwardness and visual incongruity that resulted when Civil War-style memorialization was carried into the aftermath of World War I. Depicting an American infantryman advancing across “no man’s land,” the statue is scrupulously lifelike in many of its details—“100 percent perfect,” in fact, when it comes to World War I clothing and equipment. The soldier’s gasmask carrier (hung around his neck), ammunition belt, backpack, bayonet scabbard, and Model 1903 Springfield rifle would all pass an AEF veteran’s inspection. On the statue’s base, shell-blasted stumps and actual barbed wire (frequently removed for safety reasons) add to the realistic effect. At the same time, however, the figure stands far too erect to represent credibly a soldier advancing into enemy fire. And his raised right arm, frozen in mid-swing as he hurls a hand grenade, is the phonyest touch of all. Since the doughboy is carrying his rifle in his left hand, we can only assume that he has just removed the grenade’s cotter-pin with his teeth, a common enough practice in Hollywood war films but a near impossibility in reality. John Paulding, Viquesney’s chief competitor in the doughboy-statue market, produced figures in essentially the same stance—knees bent, back straight, right arm heroically held high—only without the hand grenade. His infantrymen, however, are no more plausible than Viquesney’s. Titled Over the Top, the Paulding statue in Onaga, Kansas, for example, depicts a soldier advancing while apparently shaking his fist at the enemy.

The visual tug-of-war between photographic accuracy and creative heightening in these statues is revealing. Designing what became some of the most popular monuments of their day, Viquesney and Paulding presented ordinary foot soldiers (as opposed to abstract or purely symbolic figures such as Columbia, Uncle Sam, or Joan of Arc), and with an eye for realistic detail, they equipped their infantrymen with all the familiar accouterments of modern industrialized warfare. Yet the figures’ confident, seemingly unhurried stride, combined with their unbending posture and upraised arm, direct the viewer’s attention skyward, away

from the mud and the debris of the battlefield, and create an impression of transcendence and triumph. In other words, the figures are modern in their details, but essentially Victorian in their aesthetic, like updated Civil War statues of the triumphant variety that stand atop Grand Army of the Republic monuments (these too can be found in abundance in Kansas). Reminders of the industrial nature of World War I, a war of artillery and machine guns that reduced the individual soldier to the status of a serial number (fifty thousand American troops, we should recall, were blown up or mowed down in less than four months of major combat operations), appear in the soldiers’ equipment and the chewed-up earth over which they advance; however, their “spirit” lifts them out of this reality.

World War I victory arches, three of which survive in Kansas, are likewise throwbacks to pre-twentieth-century commemorative aesthetics. Such monuments focus not on the spirit with which American soldiers supposedly entered battle in 1917 and 1918, but on the magnitude of their achievement and sacrifice. While the Paulding and Viquesney statues are only slightly larger than life, as befitting their blend of realism and romance, the arch monuments employ a classical design on a massive scale. Their very dimensions, surpassing even those of local Civil War monuments, proclaim the majesty of American achievements in “The Great War for Civilization” (as World War I is described on the official Victory Medal issued by the War Department to all veterans) or “The War to End All War” (the famous title coined by H.G. Wells). For example, the Victory Arch at St. Mary’s Academy and College in the town of St. Mary’s, dominates the front lawn of the campus. Constructed in the early 1920s, to honor “all students in the college who made the supreme sacrifice” as well as those who survived their “call to the colors,” the monument carries special historical significance: among the fatalities it honors is William T. Fitzsimmons, a St. Mary’s alumnus who became, during a German air raid in 1917, the first American officer killed in France. Equally imposing, the forty-foot-tall replica of the Arche de Triumph built as a war memorial for the community of Rosedale (near Kansas City, Kansas) can be seen today all the way from Interstate 35, which passes a mile or so to the west. On the eve of this massive monument’s dedication in 1924, the Kansas City Star wrote, “The American flag will be carried through the memorial arch at Rosedale while military music is played tomorrow, just as the flag was carried through the arch of triumph in Paris at the close of the war.”

However, even the Rosedale Arch’s parent monument in France was miniscule in comparison with Kansas’s proposed contribution to a project that if completed would have incorporated literally hundreds of commemorative statues into the largest, most elaborate war memorial in American history. Proponents of this gargantuan Victory Highway venture envisioned a paved transcontinental

5. “St. Mary’s Memorial Arch,” Topeka Daily Capital, October 23, 1921, “Memorials and Monuments to European War Soldiers and Sailors,” clippings, 2, Library and Archives Division, Kansas State Historical Society.
6. “Rosedale Memorial Arch to be Dedicated Tomorrow,” Kansas City Star, September 6, 1924, ibid., 120–21.
road (the nation’s first) that would run straight through the American heartland and feature reminders of recent military service and sacrifice as its dominant roadside attractions. While the Rosedale Arch signified a version of war memory that tied the United States to France, plans for the Victory Highway abounded in distinctly American iconography—an appropriate approach for a project that evoked the transcontinental railroad and other engineering marvels that linked Americans across vast spaces. At each county line that the highway crossed, a monument in the shape of a Victory Eagle would bear a bronze plaque listing local servicemen, both the living and the dead. At each state line, a bronze doughboy statue (presumably one of Paulding’s or Viquesney’s designs) would greet motorists. Shade trees in roadside parks and rest stops would be dedicated in honor of the fallen. Captivated by the project’s ambitious scale, its dramatic fusion of traditional commemoration and modernity (statues and automobiles), and its obvious potential to boost state tourism and travel revenue, Kansas newspapers in the early 1920s were ecstatic. For example, the Topeka Daily Capital colorfully imagined the completed highway as “a well-kept path for the traffic of pleasure and commerce, linking ocean to ocean and stretched like a guerdon of remembrance across the bosom of a continent.” Proudly, the paper looked forward to the day when travelers would pass through the Kansas plains atop “the most magnificent memorial ever conceived.”

By 1923 seven states—Indiana, Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and California—had signed on as supporters of the proposed roadway. Backed by prominent legislators and business leaders, the Victory Highway Association had set up its national headquarters in downtown Topeka, the city selected by Benjamin Blow, who created the Victory Highway concept, as “the center of the United States for auto tourists.” On Armistice Day 1923 a dedication ceremony in Shawnee County, overseen by Kansas governor Jonathan M. Davis and attended by two thousand onlookers (including Civil War veterans, active servicemen from Fort Leavenworth, and Gold Star Mothers), officially opened the first section of the Victory Highway for motorists. At the same time, dignitaries unveiled the first Victory Eagle, upon which appeared the names of the ninety-seven Shawnee County men and women who died in the war. Pottawatomie County dedicated its roadside Victory Eagle, amid equal fanfare, the next day. To the crowds of Kansans gathered at these events, the completion of the “World’s Greatest Soldier Memorial” seemed all but certain. Commenting on the Victory Highway’s chief architect, the Topeka Daily Capital observed, “When Ben Blow sees a vision all that remains for that vision to be crystallized into reality is a little time.”

However, the energy and enthusiasm that characterized the project at its early stages waned as “a little time” stretched into years. Douglas County, which erected the state’s third and final Victory Eagle, did not hold its unveiling ceremony until 1928, and newspaper accounts of the drive to create this monument suggest that public interest in nonfunctional memorials had diminished considerably by the late 1920s. While the monuments erected by Shawnee and Pottawatomie Counties in 1923 enjoyed broad-based support from a wide variety of community organizations, just three groups—the American Legion, the American Legion Auxiliary, and the City Federation of Women’s Clubs in Lawrence—officially pushed for the Douglas County Victory Eagle. Sadly, their only significant allies seem to have been “the parents or other relatives of the boys who died in the service.” Moreover, press coverage of their funding campaign was minimal in comparison with the Topeka Daily Capital’s detailed front-page treatment of the Victory Highway five years earlier and characterized by a dourness that suggests profound changes in the shape and size of World War I in American collective memory. For example, a March 14, 1928, Lawrence Journal-World article indicated that Lawrence Harris, local American Legion post commander, supported the Victory Eagle as “one way of keeping the names of his dead comrades and the sacrifices they made in the minds of a public that has already forgotten much.” In the same article, a disabled Douglas County veteran expressed similar sentiments: “I should indeed rather be the physical wreck that I am than to have fallen in battle as did many of my buddies. I at least have lived to see the progress of the world and the feats of Colonel Lindbergh. But alas, I have also lived to see heroes of yesterday forgotten today.”

Within just five years, it would seem, the purpose of World War I community monuments—and, by extension, the Vic-

tory Highway—had shifted from celebration and recognition to the protection of memory threatened by preoccupation or indifference.

The final Kansas contribution to the Victory Highway came in 1929 when Leavenworth County commissioners placed one of John Paulding’s doughboy statues at “Victory Junction,” an important highway interchange south of Leavenworth and part of the Victory Highway route. Revealingly, the county had first raised the twenty-five hundred dollars necessary for the statue through a special tax voted into place shortly after the war (a common practice across the state). Debate over the monument’s location then delayed its completion for an entire decade: “The War Mothers wanted it at one place, and the American Legion at another and no agreement was reached until the county board decided on the Victory Junction location.”

Although the dispute’s specifics are unclear, it seems likely that one group called for the statue’s placement outside of Leavenworth, in accordance with the Victory Highway plan to feature a soldier statue next to each state line, while the other advocated a more traditional location—perhaps one near the country courthouse or the Leavenworth city hall. If so, then this debate points to a conceptual flaw in the Victory Highway scheme: asking communities to establish their monuments along a roadway may have sounded reasonable to the Victory Highway’s designers, but this approach severed the traditional connection, reinforced since the Civil War, between war monuments and centrally located public space, such as town squares, parks, and courthouse lawns. Indeed, this oversight may help explain why support for the Victory Highway concept in Kansas never made it farther west than Pottawatomie County.

In the end, the gigantic memorial designed to keep the nation from forgetting World War I was itself forgotten. With the onset of the Great Depression, the project ground to a halt, and within a decade the completed Victory Highway sections simply became part of Highway 40, a main east-west route before the construction of the interstate highway system in the 1950s. No one driving across Kansas today would know that such a grandiose scheme ever existed. However, Kansas’s Victory Highway monuments still survive, although at different locations than those intended for them in the early 1920s. Douglas County’s Victory Eagle now resides on the University of Kansas campus; Shawnee County’s, at the entrance to Gage Park in Topeka; and Pottawatomie County’s, at a street corner in Wamego near the public swimming pool (and not far from a Japanese field gun, a trophy from World War II). And the doughboy statue erected at Victory Junction in Leavenworth County? In 1941 it was moved to where at least one community group probably had wanted it placed originally—next to the entrance to the county courthouse in downtown Leavenworth.
The ironic defeat of the Victory Highway formed part of a statewide trend, as public interest in the First World War diminished, perhaps because of the conflict’s disillusioning aftermath (or simply because of the passage of time), and as functional memorials came to supplant artistic monuments as the dominant mode of commemoration. Developments in war memorial funding reflected these changing times. In 1919 and into the early 1920s many Kansas communities financed local war memorials through bonds or special taxes—as in Leavenworth County. In fact, so widespread was the desire to use public funds for commemorative purposes in the years immediately following the war that even anti-taxation sentiment, ordinarily a force to be reckoned with in the Sunflower State, could not stem the tide. In 1920 attorneys representing anti-taxation interests convinced the Kansas Supreme Court to reject as unconstitutional the 1919 memorial building law, a statute that allowed towns and counties to issue bonds or lay levies for the purchase or construction of war memorials. However, several communities—including Lawrence, Ottawa, El Dorado, Wellington, and Atchison—ignored the court’s ruling and pushed ahead with publicly funded memorials by way of legal loopholes. Further evidence of Kansas’s commitment to the use of public money for war commemoration came in 1921 when the state legislature reinstated the memorial building law, a move supported by both Governor Henry J. Allen and the Kansas Department of the American Legion.13 But the eagerness to borrow and spend, at least where soldier statues and other monuments were concerned, did not last long. By the late 1920s private fund drives—such as the one launched on behalf of the Douglas County Victory Eagle—replaced community bonds or levies, and the responsibility for war memorialization shifted from city councils and county commissioners to remembrance organizations such as the American Legion, the American Legion Auxiliary, the American War Mothers, and the Order of the Gold Star. Indeed, it was the latter organization, not the city of Newton, that in 1933 paid for the stone memorial bench, dedicated in honor of Harvey County servicemen, that still stands in downtown Newton. Likewise, the monument to Geary County veterans erected in Junction City in 1928 came courtesy of the American War Mothers—not the local government.

Even before this transition from municipal bonds or tax levies to private financing, preference for so-called living memorials, functional structures that honored the dead while simultaneously offering usable indoor space for the living, emerged across the state. Indeed, the concept was

13. “Build War Memorials,” Topeka State Journal, February 3, 1921, ibid., 19; Kansas Laws (1919), ch. 279; State v. City of Salina, 108 Kan 271 (1921); Kansas Laws (1921), ch. 256. The 1919 statute was ruled unconstitutional on procedural grounds, and the 1921 legislature simply reenacted the previous statute.
integral to the American Legion, the most powerful veterans organization of the interwar period (in the 1920s, only one hundred thousand veterans nationwide joined the legion’s chief rival, the Veterans of Foreign Wars) and a ubiquitous force in World War I memorialization and commemoration ritual.14 Following the example of the Grand Army of the Republic and the United Confederate Veterans, the American Legion established each of its posts—the very word evokes Civil War commemoration—as a memorial to an especially distinguished casualty. Thus, nearly all 332 American Legion halls currently open in Kansas—functional spaces equipped for dining, lectures, film viewings, and so forth—bear the names of local soldiers killed in action nearly a century ago.15 The namesake for the Thomas Hopkins Post (and legion hall) in Wichita, for instance, was one of the first Kansas National Guardsmen killed in France and a recipient of the Distinguished Service Cross. Likewise, the modest post in Alma, which still meets in a small brick building designated in 1936 as a Soldiers & Sailors Memorial, bears the name of Ed Palenske, a young man from the nearby town of McFarland who died in the Meuse-Argonne offensive while serving in the 353d Infantry, a unit of draftees known as the “All Kansas” Regiment. Although some Kansas legion halls have changed hands or closed in recent years due to rural depopulation and aging post memberships, enough remain to make them the most widespread, but perhaps least noticed, form of World War I commemoration in the state.16

Probably running a close second are the dozens of memorial halls and memorial auditoriums that Kansas communities tended to fund in lieu of traditional monuments. As historian Kurt Piehler has observed, these functional sites of memory reflect an aggressive post-World War I campaign on the part of American architects and construction companies, who held that statues, victory arches, and the like were a waste of public funding—and, even worse, aesthetic embarrassments. Supporters of living memorials pointed to the Victorian clutter that covered the nation’s Civil War battlefields. The “Great War for Civilization,” they argued, required a more enlightened approach to commemoration. Not surprisingly, sculptors and monument builders responded in kind by denouncing useful commemoration as an insult to the war dead, and throughout the 1920s both sides wooed American communities and remembrance organizations with predictably patriotic appeals.17 If the contest had a winner—at least where Kansas

15. Charles M. Yunker, state adjutant for the Kansas Department of the American Legion, telephone interview by author, September 14, 2005. Although legion posts can be chartered anytime, Yunker confirmed that the vast majority of existing posts in Kansas date from the 1920s and 1930s, and thus bear the names of World War I casualties. For an overview of the American Legion’s role in Kansas culture and politics, see Richard J. Loosbrock, The History of the American Legion in Kansas (Topeka: Kansas Department of the American Legion, 1968).
was concerned—it was arguably the living-memorial advocates, who managed in less than half a decade to establish memorial buildings of various kinds in almost every corner of the state. Opened in March 1921, Ottawa’s $105,000 Memorial Auditorium (funded through tax dollars and in defiance of the Kansas Supreme Court) was the first such project. Others quickly followed, including the $150,000 Memorial Auditorium in Wellington, the $200,000 county Memorial Building in Atchison, the $280,000 Memorial Hall in Independence, the $300,000 Memorial Auditorium in Salina, and the $500,000 Memorial Hall in Kansas City, Kansas, the largest such structure in the state. Functional memorials also appealed to Kansas educators. For example, the University of Kansas decided in 1920 to honor its 129 war dead not by erecting a monument (as several student and faculty groups proposed), but by constructing Memorial Stadium and Memorial Student Union. In 1923 Lawrence also became home to what might be regarded as the crown jewel of Kansas’s living memorials—Liberty Memorial High School, a state-of-the-art structure dedicated to the memory of nineteen former Lawrence high school students killed in the Great War. The new high school came into existence through an epic publicity campaign conducted by students, who in 1919 convinced voters to approve $230,000 in bonds. (A total of $494,000 would ultimately be required). The climax of their efforts came on March 27, 1919, with a spectacular all-school parade down Massachusetts Street, led by a unique veteran. The Kansas City Star reported:

Lawrence High School believes that she has the distinction of being the only high school in Kansas to have a returning soldier (Sergeant [Mahlon] Weed was wounded in the Argonne Forest) re-enter school to be graduated with his class. The 2,200 school children of Lawrence were led by Sergeant Weed, who “aided” by a diminutive 8-year-old Uncle Sam, mounted on a spirited Shetland steed. Another feature of the 1-mile parade was a living American flag formed by 1,014 grade school children.


Veterans of the Civil and Spanish-American wars, returned soldiers of the European War, members of the National Guard, and the University of Kansas and Haskell Institute bands also participated.

Faced with a campaign such as this, what voter could refuse?

In the decades that have passed since Liberty Memorial High School’s dedication in 1923, much has changed—including the building’s designation as a high school. Due to population growth in Lawrence, the structure functions today as Central Junior High School. But signs of the past remain. For example, the building continues to display its original title, flanked by Fleur de Lys, across its front fascia. In addition, three stone soldiers—one British, one American, and one French—still look out from the second story. Stone benches, poignantly dedicated “For Those Whose Smiles We’ve Lost,” greet visitors at the main entrance. Catherine Martin, currently an English teacher at Central Junior High, routinely uses the building’s history as a research subject for students in her newspaper class, who are always surprised to learn that their immediate surroundings have a connection to World War I—and that the cornerstone of their school building is a time capsule whose contents include “a Bible, a dictionary, a copy of the budget, the high school publication, [and] campaign literature issued before the [1919] bond issue was taken.”

Generally successful, proposals for living memorials were, however, frequently affected by the vagaries of local politics. And in some instances they failed. Such was the case in Ellsworth County where the issue of war commemoration became entangled with competition for county resources and rivalry among communities. On October 30, 1919, a half-page political advertisement in the Wilson World and other local newspapers called upon voters throughout the county to support the construction of a memorial county hospital in the town of Ellsworth. “Show Your Appreciation,” the advertisement begins, “Eventually we shall build a memorial to our Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, and Red Cross Nurses. Why not do it now? Why not make it useful as well as ornamental?” After indicating that “[t]he state legislature at its last session provided that the county might vote bonds or incur indebtedness for the erection of . . . a memorial” (a reference to the 1919 memorial building law), the advertisement launches into a series of manipulative appeals designed to convince prospective voters that a vote cast for the hospital was an expression of support “for the boys who sleep yonder in France.” At the center of the page, beneath the words “Lest We forget,” appear the names of the fifteen Ellsworth County soldiers lost during the war. And at the bottom, seven columns thick, is a list of local war veterans who endorsed the project. One week after this advertisement’s appearance, the Wilson World announced that the hospital bond proposal had failed during a special election held on November 4. Reading between the lines, it is not difficult to see why. Townspeople throughout the county may well have supported the idea of a living memorial—but only if it were placed in their own town. Thus, Ellsworth, doubtless the principal instigator of the proposal and the community that stood to gain the most from it, voted for the memorial hospital “en mass.”

Every other town in the county turned out against it. In the end, the Wilson World observed, the issue came down to “a contest between Ellsworth City and the rest of the county, and very few of the voters were affected by the ‘soldier gratitude’ side of it which was injected into the controversy.” On Armistice Day 1919, just a few days after the announcement of the memorial hospital’s demise, Wilson dedicated the doughboy monument that still stands there today—a symbolic victory for the traditional, nonfunctional memorial at a time when utilitarian commemoration was on the rise.

In an inventory of Kansas World War I monuments prepared in 2004, archeologist Randall M. Thies lists fifty-four nonfunctional memorials, including soldier statues, victory arches, obelisks, and weapon displays such as the pair of World War I machine guns that stand guard in front of the Frankfort American Legion Post and the two World War I gun barrels (each taken from a famous French “75”) anchored in concrete in the Russell City Park. If this figure were to be combined with the total number of American Legion posts dedicated in honor of World War I casualties, as well as the total number of memorial buildings of various kinds (unknown at present, but sizable), we would probably learn that Kansas World War I memorials outnumber those of every other conflict—with the possible exception

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of the Civil War. Why, then, did World War I inspire commemoration on such a massive scale in Kansas? What was it about this particular conflict that led so many communities to invest in monuments as well as living memorials?

One explanation perhaps resides in the ambiguities of World War I itself. Little about United States intervention in “The Great War for Civilization” fits easily into a coherent master narrative. Even the amount of credit that Americans could claim afterwards depended on one’s perspective. Did the United States, in some sense, win the war for the Allies? Or was American participation significant only in so far as it brought more bodies to bear against the German Army in a grinding contest of attrition? Such questions had no easy answers in the 1920s, and they continue to be debated by historians today. The performance of the AEF in battle was also (and remains) a murky subject. Did the hair-raising number of AEF casualties during its two hundred days of fighting signify admirable aggressiveness and “spirit” or sloppy tactics and incompetent leadership? And then there was the most devastating question of all: what, exactly, did America’s overseas crusade achieve? Certainly not a world made safe for democracy. Astute observers of the treaty negotiations that followed the Armistice could see another global conflict in the making as France and Great Britain set about the task of crippling the German economy, and as Woodrow Wilson’s idealistic plans for international progressivism, outlined in his Fourteen Points, went to pieces after colliding with deep-seated European hatreds and ambitions. If the war had not, in fact, managed to “end all war,” then what had been the point of American involvement?

In short, ambiguity and confusion defined the conflict that Kansans commemorated so energetically in the early 1920s. Thus, memorials from this period may be seen, in a sense, as monuments to anxiety—as evidence of a hunger for meaning and clarity within events that were, in so many ways, disorienting and problematic. Uncertainty regarding the war’s true meaning perhaps explains the inflated rhetoric inscribed on World War I memorials, with their strained references to the “Noble Fallen” and to “The Great War for Civilization”; the strange mixture of the Victorian and the modern seen most vividly in Spirit of the American Doughboy; the grandiosity of the Victory Highway scheme; and the ubiquity of Kansas World War I commemoration in general.

At the same time, however, more straightforward explanations present themselves. For example, the patterns of military remembrance established after the Civil War, one
of the most memorialized conflicts in American history, all but guaranteed that American soldiers in World War I, inheritors of a proud martial tradition, would receive their own lavish public recognition. Heroic doughboy statues, American Legion posts, and other integral trappings of World War I commemoration conform to cultural templates created in the late nineteenth century to honor the “blue” and the “gray.” Thus, even given the dubious international benefits of the “great crusade,” and the sense of fraud increasingly associated with the episode (especially in such literary works as John Dos Passos’s *Three Soldiers*, Thomas Boyd’s *Through the Wheat*, and James Stevens’s *Mattock*), it is difficult to imagine Kansas communities in the early 1920s doing anything other than what they did—honor their war dead and their returning soldiers in the best fashion they knew. And, finally, it is worth remembering that some American World War I memorials have little to do with the conflict’s interpretations, either celebratory or otherwise. After the mid-1920s, when war memorial public funding evaporated (along with the public’s illusions regarding American intervention), the organizations most active in military commemoration, such as the American Legion or American War Mothers, sought not to glorify a largely discredited cause, but simply to keep the names of those destroyed by war, and of those who returned, alive in community memory.

History, as it turns out, thwarted even this modest goal. Within little more than two decades of the Armistice, another world war erupted, one that would leave “The War to End All War” permanently in its shadow (at least from the American perspective). Then came more conflicts, together with new forms of American military remembrance, including the famous Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., an anti-memorial, one might say, that turns the conventions of World War I commemoration inside out. With the passage of time, Kansas memorials from the 1920s and 1930s endured various vicis-

The strange destiny of the World War I monument at Fort Hays State University illustrates this transformation perfectly. Dedicated by the class of 1919 in honor of the twelve Fort Hays students who died in the war, this monument originally featured a drinking fountain (thus, it was in part a living memorial), as well as a reflecting pool, over which a granite slab listing each student’s name, rank, and unit was mounted.27 By the early 1990s only the granite tablet remained, now fixed to a concrete base and half hidden by evergreen bushes. Few on campus were aware of its existence. When the expansion of nearby Picken Hall began in 1997, part of the university’s five-year celebration of its centennial, the tablet disappeared, seemingly for good. Then, on October 10, 1998, a new monument, erected in honor of all Fort Hays students lost in all wars since the university’s founding in 1902, was unveiled—with the remnant of the original World War I memorial “entombed” inside it. The dedication program for the new monument sheds little light on the decisions that led to its design. It indicates only that the university’s president, Edward H. Hammond, “commissioned the preservation of the World War I memorial and its incorporation into a new memorial honoring all veterans.”28 What the president had in mind when issuing this commission is unknown. However, it is clear that the architects of the new monument assumed no one would wish to see the artifact they had been charged to incorporate into their design. Their actions say volumes about the place of World War I in present American memory.

27. The only known photograph of the original Fort Hays World War I monument is in the Forsyth Library Special Collections Department, Fort Hays State University, Hays, Kans. For a newspaper announcement regarding the monument, see the Fort Hays Normal School’s newspaper The Leader 7 (January 9, 1919):1.

28. “Veterans Memorial Dedication” (manuscript, Forsyth Library Special Collections Department, Fort Hays State University, 1998).
In 1958 Memorial Union at Fort Hays State University was dedicated in honor of the twelve students killed in World War I, along with the fifty-six students lost in World War II, and the five who never returned from the Korean conflict. A rededication ceremony in 1983 recognized nine students killed in the Vietnam War. A plaque next to the union’s main entrance lists the names of the World War I casualties and those from other wars. It does not, however, include the rank and unit information that is inscribed, but now unavailable, on the original World War I monument. The twelve who died in World War I are Ralph Burns, Eric H. Cummings, George Davis, William Finch, Charles Harvey, Julius S. Johnson, Julian R. Lahman, C.J. Middlekauff, Arthur M. Scott, Jacob E. Sturm, William Rolla Terrill, and Graven I. Wright.

Yet even an entombed memorial continues to signify. Now hidden from view, encased within its limestone sarcophagus, the Fort Hays monument is the most mournful World War I memorial of them all—and, paradoxically, perhaps the richest in meaning. Although invisible, its list of forgotten names carries a ghostly message. It reminds us that no one can fix the meaning of an event in stone (or even guarantee that a conflict as devastating as World War I will be remembered less than a century later), and that history is greater and more chaotic than the images and symbols with which we attempt to contain it. These may not be the lessons that the Fort Hays class of 1919 had in mind, but they are lessons that all Kansans, indeed all Americans, should consider when contemplating the possibility of future wars.

29. In 1958 Memorial Union at Fort Hays State University was dedicated in honor of the twelve students killed in World War I, along with the fifty-six students lost in World War II, and the five who never returned from the Korean conflict. A rededication ceremony in 1983 recognized nine students killed in the Vietnam War. A plaque next to the union’s main entrance lists the names of the World War I casualties and those from other wars. It does not, however, include the rank and unit information that is inscribed, but now unavailable, on the original World War I monument. The twelve who died in World War I are Ralph Burns, Eric H. Cummings, George Davis, William Finch, Charles Harvey, Julius S. Johnson, Julian R. Lahman, C.J. Middlekauff, Arthur M. Scott, Jacob E. Sturm, William Rolla Terrill, and Graven I. Wright.