

CHAPTER VII

POSTSCRIPT – AFTER 1935

When we build let us think that we build forever.

John Ruskin, 1849

The report of the Location Committee presented to the Board of Governors, January 24, 1920, made a number of points as to why ". . . the best and most available location in all of Kansas City was the eight and one-half acre Station Park and the ground lying between that and Penn Valley Park."¹ Included in the report of J. C. Nichols, Vice President of the Liberty Memorial Association and Chairman of its Location Committee were: The Union Station's fixed location as hub of streetcar transportation and boulevard and traffic approaches; absence of improvements needing costly removal; commanding elevation which would preclude overshadowing by future surrounding developments; and its centrality enabling the future memorial to "reach the hearts of the greatest number of people."² All of these factors added up to a location "near to the center of the community" which Kansas City would never outgrow.³

In recommending that the Board of Park Commissioners and City Council be asked to condemn the land for park purposes, Mr. Nichols had spelled out the elaborate art center plans which had been formu-

¹"Minutes," 230.

²Ibid., 231.

³Ibid., 230-231.

lated. In addition to building the Liberty Memorial itself, it was envisioned that a music hall; separate museums for painting, for sculpture, and for natural history; buildings for archaeology, history (with perhaps Indian relics), and an art institute; and a botanical conservatory would be built.⁴ Besides these plans, building an outdoor amphitheatre or forum for concerts and pageants was proposed. The Vice President of the Association, who was to continue in that position for eighteen more years,⁵ concluded his presentation for "perhaps the greatest cause that has ever confronted our city" by saying:

The universal gratitude and patriotism of our great American city can be recorded here for all generations to come — a vision of the ideals of our people can be lifted where all may see and follow upward in their daily lives.⁶

Only the Liberty Memorial proper, "the keynote" structure of that grand plan, was built.

The city which had been centered on its train station in 1920 has changed. Kansas City, Missouri itself has become the center of a complex of Missouri and Kansas towns and cities with a population of

⁴Ibid., 232.

⁵Ibid. It is recorded in the "Minutes," 28 January 1938, that to further respond to demands for more representation, made by the American Legion twelve years earlier, Liberty Memorial Association President George S. Carkener called for the resignation of Trustees who were not themselves members of the American Legion or another World War I service organization. There were forty-three resignations, including Mr. Nichols.

⁶Ibid., 235.

close to a million and a half.⁷ The Union Station is not the hub but a heroic, empty shell with an uncertain future. Train travel, today, is almost non-existent so visitors no longer emerge from Jarvis Hunt's grand depot to view Kansas City's Acropolis.

Since the site was chosen many lofty downtown additions have drastically changed the skyline to the north. Beginning in 1968, Sign Board Hill on the east, became the site of high-rising Crown Center buildings⁸ which, although not overshadowing the Memorial, certainly change its setting and make possible exciting latter-day views of the Liberty Memorial which would have been beyond the imagination of its architect and Kansas Citians of the 1920s -- a variety of wonderful geometric patterns. (Fig. 26) Intriguing combinations of its shaft and flanking buildings, buttresses and great wall colored by light and shadow come into view from surrounding vantage points. Motorists can find countless juxtapositions of its outlines as they glance from their cars, and routine trips become extraordinary! Sweeping aerial views regularly shown on television newscasts make the Liberty Memorial once again a dynamic symbol of Kansas City.

J. C. Nichols, in the 1920 Committee on Location report, declared that Kansas City would never outgrow the desirability of the Liberty Memorial's location.⁹ In spite of the changes of nearly seventy years,

⁷The population of greater Kansas City in 1987 is 1,784,300. Rand McNally Commercial Atlas, 118th ed. (1987): 41.

⁸For the history of Crown Center, see Ehrlich, Kansas City, 156-161.

⁹"Minutes," 231.

no more appropriate site in Kansas City can be imagined, at least by this writer. The key is probably still the Union Station, now defunct, and finding a suitable use for it, as surely there must be. Adjacent Crown Center is, indeed, a vital business, shopping, and residential complex. The Liberty Memorial, Union Station, and Crown Center triangle should be loaded with possibilities. The recent Fourth of July Spirit Festivals on Liberty Memorial Hill are one positive, future-facing indication.¹⁰ Renaissance of downtown building in the '80s is a harbinger of better things for the general area.

While the setting of the Liberty Memorial has changed considerably over the years, the Memorial itself has changed little. There are, however, two significant changes which should be noted. In Memory Hall, Daniel MacMorris' handsome murals on the north, south, and west walls which were added in the 1950s, complement the original east wall painting, In Memoriam, by Jules Guerin. The Kansas City artist's brilliant reduction of the colossal French Pantheon de la Guerre (from 45' x 402' to 16' x 69') on the north wall is particularly striking.¹¹

¹⁰Beginning in 1984, various historic, civic, and service groups of the area put together an ambitious collection of outdoor activities and entertainment which looked to the past and future, called "Kansas City Spirit." This three-day program of festive events, including fireworks, has much the light-hearted atmosphere of an old fashioned county fair and would seem to be the beginning of a happy annual tradition.

¹¹The Pantheon de la Guerre came to Kansas City in 1957. Re-dedication Committee of the Liberty Memorial, Liberty Memorial Rededication, (Kansas City: Glenn Printing Co., 1961) 21.

The subject of MacMorris' mural on the west wall is the scene of the 1921 dedication and contains more than 100 portraits of those

Another admirable development is that which has taken place in the Museum building beginning in December 1976 with the arrival of Curator Mark Beveridge. That facility, until then an encased-in-amber type of World War I reliquary, has been transformed into a world-class museum of the First World War. This has increased the Memorial's attraction to tourists and tours by school children.¹²

Edward Durrell Stone has said of the Liberty Memorial, "It is one of the country's great memorials -- in a class with the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials."¹³ Kansas City's "most cherished enterprise," which has served its purpose so long and well, was very likely the choice as his crowning achievement of its architect, H. Van Buren Magonigle. (Fig. 27) His unique concept was and is a complete and satisfying statement. Kansas City's Liberty Memorial gives and will continue to give assurance that:

THE AGES SHALL NEVER FORGET!

participating. This first Memory Hall mural addition was dedicated in 1950. The south wall bears MacMorris' painting of Women in War, dedicated in 1956, with pendent panels added in 1970. Also, Mr. MacMorris completely repainted Guerin's faded In Memoriam.

The center portion of the Pantheon de la Guerre showing a sea of portraits of French heroes, refurbished by MacMorris, was mounted on the east wall of the Museum building.

It will be remembered that the youthful MacMorris was one of those considered for the original Memory Hall mural.

¹²Museum Curator Mark Beveridge reports that in recent years approximately 250,000 visit the Liberty Memorial annually. Annual attendance at Kansas City's Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art is approximately 375,000 and 81,000 at the Kansas City Museum.

¹³Joe McGuff, "Let's start on Union Station now," Kansas City Star, 13 December 1987, 33A.