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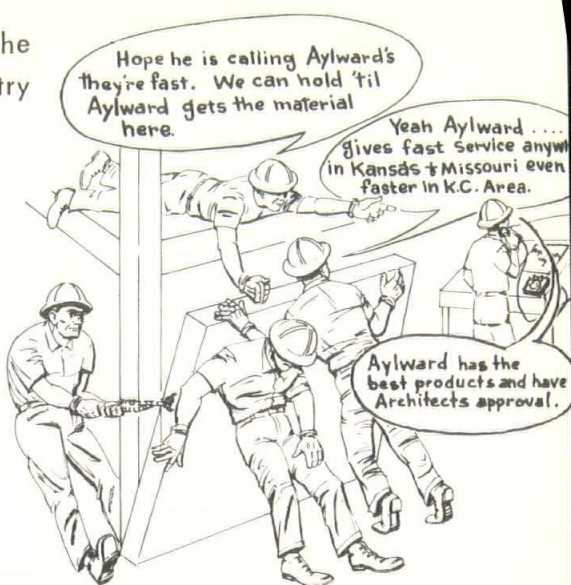
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SKYLINES

and
MIDWEST ARCHITECT

Vol. 13, No. 8

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
President's Page	3
Concrete Industry Board	5
Program '63-'63	6
Postoffice Suggests VIM	7
Better Signs	8
Enigmatic Local Architect	15
Membership	31

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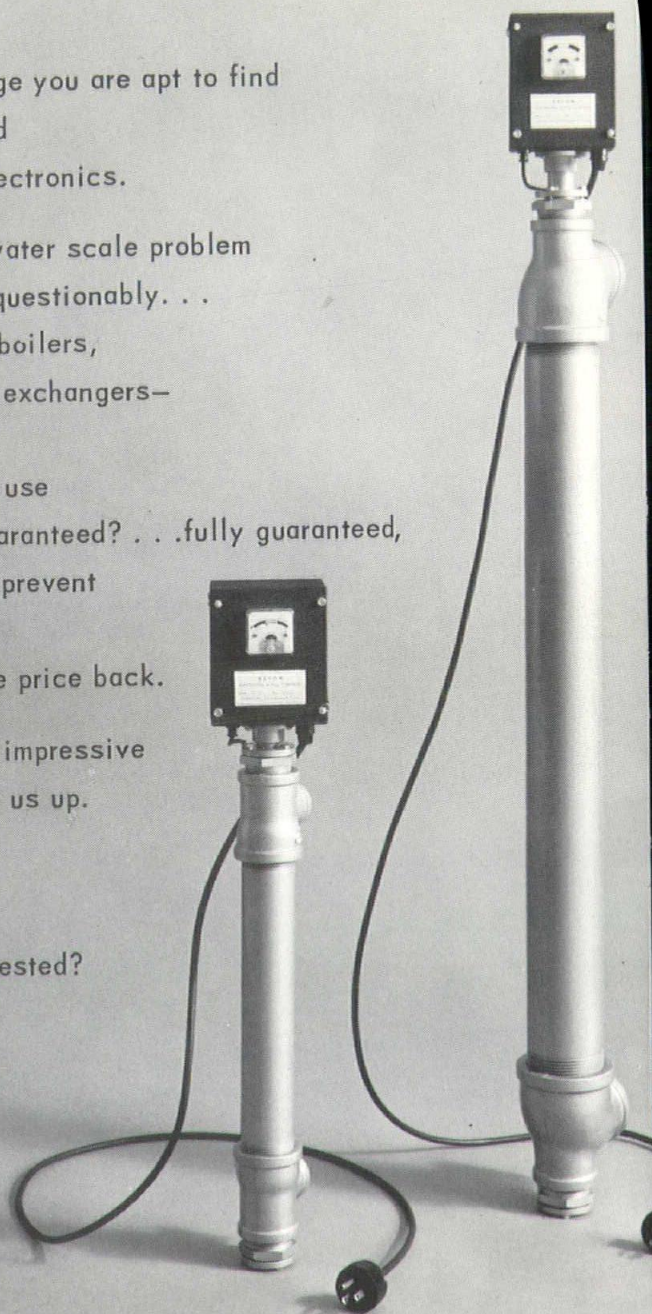
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LOUIS GEIS

President's Page

I can think of no better message to the membership than to quote a statement originally made by John E. Brink, A.I.A., in order to remind all of us of the responsibilities and effect of membership in The Institute.

"Membership in the A.I.A. is significant for the member — for the Chapter — for The Institute.

"The A.I.A. is a body, real and tangible, alive — and in truth made up of the flesh and blood and minds of the individual members.

"It can make use of no strength, assemble no thoughts, take no action, resolve to move toward an objective, make no contribution to man, which does not originate and emanate from its members.

"The very being of the A.I.A. is the aggregate of its respective individual members.

"Benefits flowing from the Institute, while intangible, are continuous: while indirect, are of great value to each member individually.

"This is true because the A.I.A. was founded on the basis of sound, intelligent and completely honest propositions.

"The following quotations from the by-laws of the Institute are quite clear and need no explanation.

"The profession of architecture calls for men of the highest integrity, judgment, business capacity, and artistic and technical ability.

"An architect's honesty of purpose must be above suspicion: he acts as professional adviser to his client and his advice must be unprejudiced: he is charged with the exercise of judicial functions as between client and contractors and must act with entire impartiality: he has moral responsibilities to his professional associates and subordinates: he is engaged in a profession which carries with it grave responsibilities to the public. These duties and responsibilities cannot be properly discharged unless his motives, conduct, and ability, are such to command respect."

These are sound premises. They constitute a real guide — to be followed without reservation."

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MID-WEST CONCRETE INDUSTRY BOARD, INC.

by Chris P. Ramos

Following is a copy of a Resolution of the Board of Directors of the Kansas City Chapter, I.A.:

"We believe that securing corrective measures in the concrete industry requires the coordinated effort of all persons connected with the industry. That is the basic purpose of the Concrete Industry Board. Certainly the work of the CIB is in the best interests of the architectural profession. Inasmuch as Chapter members were among the principal organizers, it would seem fitting that they should continue as one of the principal participants in the continuing efforts of the Concrete Industry Board."

Approximately a year and a half has passed since the above Resolution was adopted by the Board of Directors of your Chapter. This is a report to bring you up to date as to the present developments.

New officers for the 1963-64 year were elected at the June 1963 annual meeting of the Industry Board. These officers are Lewis G. H. Chief, Engineering Division, Corps of Engineers, President; Chris P. Ramos, of the architectural firm of Geis, Hunter & Ramos, Vice President; S. J. Callahan of the S. J. Callahan Consulting Engineering Co., Treasurer; and, Frank A. Beets, Portland Cement Association, Secretary.

To this date 16 bulletins on various subjects concerning materials and construction procedures for the improvement of the quality of concrete construction have been approved by the Board of Directors and printed.

Two approved standard concrete specifications for use by architects and engineers in their standard specifications have been approved by the Board of Directors and printed. These two specifications pertain to the subject of Cold and Hot Weather Concreting Operations. Additional specification sheets

are being developed from the previously approved bulletins by the Design & Specifications Committee of the Industry Board under the able leadership of Edward W. Tanner, Chairman, and Walter N. Linville, Vice Chairman. These additional printed specifications should be available in the near future.

Other committees are working on such things as standard concrete mix and use table recommendations; concrete materials sampling and testing recommendations; admixture usage recommendations; criteria for requirements of laboratory personnel and equipment, including laboratory inspection recommendations; and, standard recommendations for manufacture and usage of concrete masonry units.

The Industry Board is making good progress and before long it is hoped that a complete set of standard specifications will have been developed for usage by architects and engineers in the Greater Kansas City area.

A Notebook designed for the filing of the bulletins and specifications has been devised and is now available. It may be purchased from the Secretary (811 Home Savings Building, Phone, Victor 2-0892) at a cost of \$3.25 each. The purchase of this book will assure the receiving of all standards, specifications and recommendations as they are developed.

The Mid-West Concrete Industry Board proposes to assist all of those in the concrete construction industry in producing quality concrete.

The advantages to architects and builders in assisting and becoming a part of the Mid-West Concrete Industry Board are immeasurable. The benefits to be realized by preparation and incorporation of standard specifications are alone one of the greatest improvements to the backbone of the concrete construction industry.

Your participation and assistance in this endeavor is strongly recommended.

Programs '63-'64

These are the beginning years of a significant change in the evolution of mankind.

History is witnessing the final era of production by mankind's physical ability.

The history and civilization of the future will result from production of mankind's mental ability.

Building construction is a product of mankind's physical ability.

Architecture is a product of mankind's mental ability.

Architecture is the only fine art of direct service to mankind.

The creation of environment is the service rendered to mankind.

Understanding mankind is the first step to the solution of environmental problems.

Environment must serve mankind's current needs.

Environment must prepare mankind for the future.

Programs for the 1963-64 meetings of the Kansas City Chapter of the American Institute of Architects will be a related series of panel discussions and open forums based on the theme "The Quality of Man". Each program will study an element of mankind's daily existence; religion, health, education, work, home, recreation, government. Each program will attempt to determine for the present and for the future, the basic attitudes of mankind with regard to the subject discussed. It is hoped this series of programs will provide a summation of knowledge on the nature of mankind that will better prepare Architects of this community for the creation of environment, for today and for tomorrow.

Postoffice Suggests VIM for the Architect

The Postoffice Department is given to strenuous, action names for its proposals-----first ZIP, now VIM.

And VIM is aimed right at the architect.

The Postoffice would illustrate its point with the Crown Zellerbach building on a 1-1/3 acre site in San Francisco's financial district. .

Designed by Hertzka & Knowles and Skidmore, Owings, & Merrill, the structure serves as a headquarters building for Crown Zellerbach Corporation and to provide rental space for other firms, which occupy about 50 per cent of the total space.

Enter VIM.

Prior to placing the VIM system in operation, mail carriers delivered mail directly to tenant offices in the building. Mail for building tenants now is delivered to a Postoffice distribution facility in the basement of the Crown Zellerbach building where it is sorted by a Postoffice employee. He then places the sorted mail in separate locked containers for each tenant, sets a dial indicating at which floor the container is to be delivered, and dispatches it to that floor via the Lamson automatic conveyor system. The container is ejected from the conveyor system into a small room when it reaches a particular floor and is picked up at that point.

Outgoing tenant mail is returned to the container, the container is locked, placed on the conveyor system on that particular floor and automatically returned to the Postoffice facility in the basement of the building. At that point it is removed from the container, sacked and picked up by the Postoffice on a regular schedule during the day.

How about that?

You owe it to yourself t

My friend Hal Sandy, a frank, imaginative, happy serious practitioner of the advertising arts, has written this hardhitting article especially for Skylines.

Chris Ra

By Hal Sandy

I work in a building that supposedly cost more money per square foot than any other building in Kansas City. Skidmore designed it. It was their first Kansas City project. Perhaps you remember this little jewel box at 4215 Baltimore Avenue. After the tenants moved in, suddenly a sign went up. Not a Skidmore sign. One designed by local sign painters. The resulting effect was, *and remains*, somewhat like customizing a Rolls-Royce!

The sign, the building's signature, is that finishing touch that always gets left to the last. And to the architect's chagrin, that sign can turn an elegant turnkey job into just-another-building.

As an architect, it's your job to know *something* about signing the buildings you design and build. That you don't know much

about this is the uglified reality one can see just by driving down Kansas City (or any other city's) streets. This little article offers a few suggestions to you, the architect, on how to deal with your own esthetic requirements and the client's worthy desires to promote himself and his firm with signs.

Let's take the case that prompted this writing: luncheon conversation with a friend who just completed a smart new bank. He said to me: "And after we finished the job, would you know it, they had their sign man put that same sign they had on the old building. Why?"

I went to see this bank building, which would remain nameless. I think I know what went wrong. The architect's well designed sign on the front is excellent. But the building has



CUSTOMIZED ROLLS When I think of the planning and agony that went into this facade, only to be larded with this junky sign, it makes me sick. Signs are necessary, important. But the architect must lead by designing them in. Not leaving it to the client and hoping he will do a good job like this.

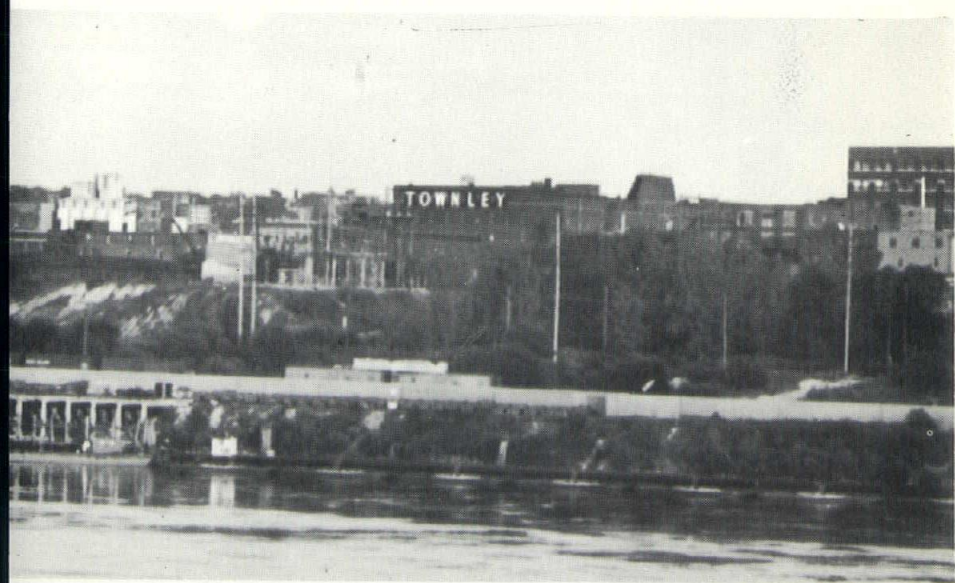
do a better job on signs

side street exposure and a rear exposure too. No signs were incorporated into the building plan, side and rear. So after the architect moved out, the client, his wife or one of the board members said, "Why didn't you have a sign on the back or here on the side?" And so the handiest thing to do was call the local sign man and he proposed--(My God!) re-using the old sign! (Sign men are terrible pack rats. They usually save those old signs hoping to sell them to someone else.) They re-hung the old sign, but to the detriment of the building and the urban landscape. This shouldn't have happened. And we must try to stop its recurrence. There is no reason why architects can't earn enough about signing to do it *right* and to satisfy the client in the *first place* so he won't continue to ruin the good work you've done by putting up a bad sign. So here are four suggestions:

1. *Design the building signature* and all the other exterior sign(s) right into your first plans. Don't put them on *last* like costume jewelry. Plan the signs and tell the



TASTELESS *Holiday Inns, in spite of their upgrading of America's motels, have the worst signs on the road. Disgracefully gaudy and junky. Not reflecting the better quality standard of the rooms they offer.*



TASTEFUL *Townley's sign merely litters the skyline. The light bill and the post of the sign, from a promotion man's viewpoint, can't help being an ugly extravagance.*

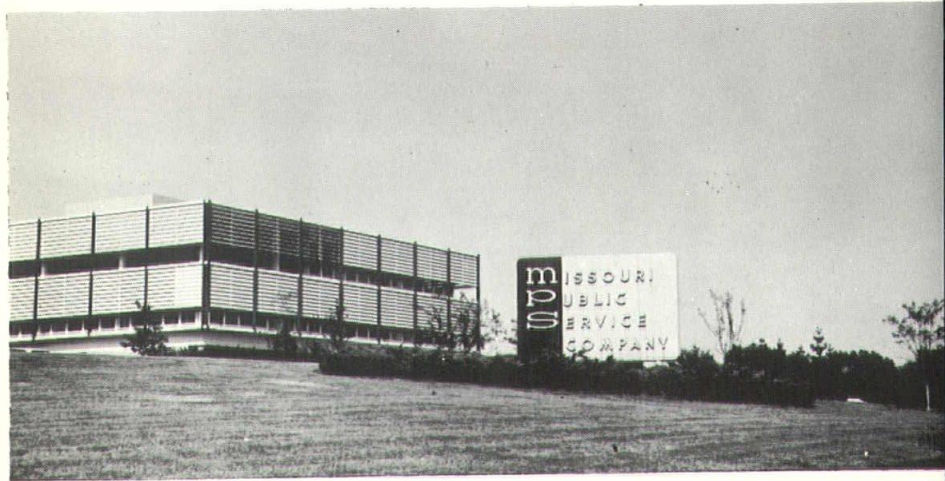


UNREADABLE *The simple lettering on the brick shaft is adequate if unimaginative. But the rounding top piece uglies an otherwise attractive building with a sign that can't even be read.*

client you intend to handle them from the beginning. Stay in control.

2. *Get help.* If you don't know lettering styles and graphics, and you probably don't, then *hire help*. Where? Go to the art director of the client's advertising agency. Or hire a graphic designer. You can't know everything, so get someone who does know type styling and have him help design the signing to suit BOTH your esthetic and the client's promotional viewpoints. What about asking a sign company? Well, would you ask the marble company to design the facade? Could you count on a plumber to specify the pipe-up? The sign man is in it for a buck. That he has no knowledge of esthetics, promotion or design is obvious. You are the one to lead, direct, and demand excellence in this important detail too.

3. *Argue, cajole, and insist* on a tasteful approach to signs. For example, many signs aren't even needed and are actually a financial as well as esthetic waste. The picture of the TOWNLEY sign is a good example of this waste. Townley is a wholesaler; no retail business. In the Kansas City area totally, I doubt they have over 100 real honest-to-God buying customers. How many of these go back and forth to North Kansas City and ever see this sign? Someone, granted not an architect in this case, should have talked



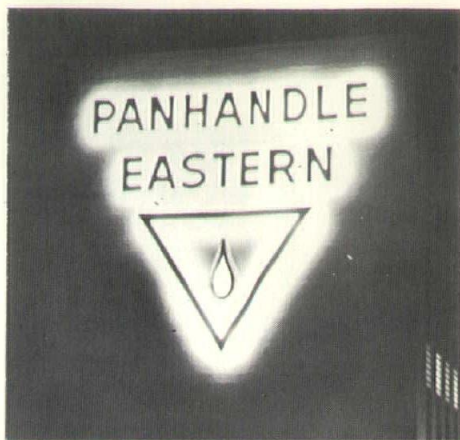
MISMATCHED *The MPS building may be the best styled contemporary building in the Kansas City area. The sign, tho better than some, does not come up to the structure it announces. I hope they'll replace these signs with something that matches the handsome style of the building.*

ownley out of wasting its money and blighting
the Kansas City skyline.

4. *Recognize the client's promotional needs.* Let's take the case of
bank, the one where my company banks, the
Plaza bank on Nichols road. An elegant, trim,
modern and well designed building. But the
signs that now mark this bank nicely at the
pedestrian level, were only installed recently,
years after the bank was built. Before the
signs were installed, it was common for people
to ask "where is the Plaza Bank?" and be
standing almost in front of it! Why? The
architect's fault. That the handsome and help-
ful signs later did go up is a credit to the un-
usually high level of taste of this bank's
management, not to the architect's planning.

There is another area where architects also
could be taken to task: the building *with-*
out or with *too little* marking. The new
Public Library downtown is a shrinking violet.
Luke's Hospital, an old building, is un-
marked from the street view. Give the public
a chance. Common sense dictates the size
and placement for signing.

You must always take into consideration
the pedestrian's-eye-view: how he will view
the building from down the street; how he will
view the front door from the sidewalk, right



OVERSIGNED This company sells no
gas in the Kansas City area. Again,
an architect's nice new building has
been iced with the sign man's frosting
for almost no reason. Promotionally,
this sign is throwing money away and
cluttering a view on Broadway that is
bad enough already. By comparison,
the neighboring Kansas City Life and
Interstate Securities buildings have
restrained simple signs that do the
job well.



BEST The simplest and perhaps smartest signing in Kansas City. Building is
well marked and tasteful. Skidmore handled this detail superbly.



PUNY Sometimes a sign can be too small and too understated. This "tiny" plastic sign marks the entrance to Monsanto's executive and research headquarters. Hundreds of acres, a score of huge buildings in their world headquarters. The architect should have handled this detail.



CLASSIC This sign on a warehouse in St. Louis is so simple that it's almost perfect. Facing Lindbergh Boulevard, it marks the building perfectly for those who need to know it in the drug trade. The architect did this one well.

out in front. The pedestrian isn't a dummy, his mind is on other things. Buildings and entrances have to be clearly marked *at eye level*, and with lettering large enough for the nearsighted and even the near blind. From the car, the building's signing is still a different problem. So, I've been critical, are there any GOOD examples of building signing in Kansas City?

Of course, the Plaza's new John Hancock signing is an excellent example of a tasteful, smart, realistic program. The Hilton Inn is bad. The simple lettering on the Armed Forces Building on Broadway though small is adequate. Harzfeld's stores are always clearly, simply, tastefully marked. The Inn at the Landing well signed. The BMA building? So far, so good. Whether SOM and the management are discussing a giant neon BMA and a weather beacon to top this fine new structure, I couldn't guess. But I'll be holding my breath, till dedication, that this building's elegant design will be preserved. Kansas City signs aren't so bad but I've been hard pressed to come up with these good examples. You will be too, you look about.

It's up to you, the architect and conservator of our skyline and our street views, to keep that urban view exciting, orderly and pleasing. The public can't control it. The city fathers don't know how to deal with it. The client understandably wants to promote his company. You, the architect, can serve all these causes by learning a little more about signing, hiring someone to work with you who does know graphics. By leading, instead of leaving it to the customer to work out for himself, your elegant clean facades will please you and your client's needs.

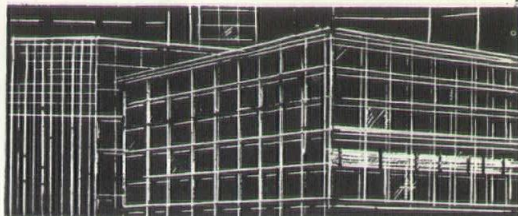
Summary

1. *Design the sign program* in the exterior planning from the first sketches.
2. *If you don't know graphic lettering, trademarks, hire help on signs.*
3. *Learn the client's needs*--he building this building to promote as well as provide space.
4. *Lead*--accept the sign problems, your responsibility and lead the client in the last, but important detail.

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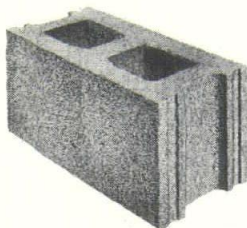


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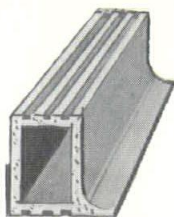
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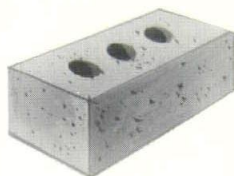
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Life of an Enigmatic Local Architect

BY FRED T. COMEE

The life of an enigmatic architect, who lived and practiced at the turn of the century, has been returned from oblivion. Although he is almost completely unknown today, buildings of this individualist are progenitors of some of our present-day structural and aesthetic concepts.

On the walls of a third-floor storeroom in an old building in Kansas City, Missouri, these words are inscribed:

—"Our doubts are traitors and make us lose the good we oft might win by fearing to attempt."

—"I will go into the desert and dwell among ruins. I will interrogate ancient monuments amid the waste places of vanished empires."

These were the maxims by which an enigmatic architect named Louis Curtiss lived. This room was once a part of his luxurious apartment in the building he designed and built for himself in 1908. Here, at 1118 McGee Street, his office was located, and here his life ended nearly 40 years ago.

Louis Curtiss is vaguely remembered as a strange and eccentric man of exceptional talent, one who combined unusual originality with a strong feeling for traditional styles. An early proponent of simplicity in design and the straightforward expression of structure, he belonged to the avant-garde of his time and was opposed to the prevailing current of neo-classicism. His works range from cottages to railroad stations, theaters, hotels, and a World's Fair building. He designed the first metal-and-glass curtain-wall building, which was also probably the first to use rolled-steel sections instead of built-up ones for the columns of its structural frame. He pioneered in the development of reinforced-concrete construction and delved deeply into the principles that govern its use. Many of his buildings are progenitors of some of today's structural and aesthetic concepts, significant contributions to the evolution of "modern architecture," and some bear the mark of distinction. Yet even his best works, like the man himself, are almost completely unknown.

Louis Curtiss was an individualist. Strong willed, independent, and uncompromising, he was a man of strong convictions, which he rarely hesitated to express. His voice was authoritative, his vocabulary unusually large, and his personality dynamic. Though always polite, his attitude was often unsympathetic

Continued on page 17

Interstate Securities new office building uses bone white panels combined with glass and aluminum to achieve modern decor. Architects: Angus McCallum and Kivett & Meyers Contractor: Sharp Bros. Contracting Co.



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to the aesthetic notions of prospective clients. About 5'-6" tall and of medium build, he strove constantly for self-expression and was inclined to be dramatic in both manner and attire. He dressed well, as befitted the gentleman he was, always wearing an ascot tie, and frequently a "rough-rider"-type fedora, white suits and shoes. Although he never drank, he smoked cigarettes incessantly; and while he paid his rent in gold coin, rather than by check, he cut his own hair. Inevitably, he was always regarded as being somewhat less than conventional.

Primarily intellectual in his interests apart from architecture, Curtiss was an avid reader, and a student of philosophy and religion as well as archaeology. His conversation was full of profound observations and quotations from his books. One of his favorite reflections on life, drawn from the Chinese philosopher Lao-Tse, was that, to a man lying on his back, a column assumes the aspects of a beam. He was also zealously devoted to the Ouija board, made his own planchette, and often sought the counsel of "Romeo," his fancied guide in the spirit world.

Throughout his life he rarely talked about his origin or family background, dismissing such inquiries by saying he was an orphan who had run away. Although at first he mingled in the social life of Kansas City, he was not a good mixer, and as the years passed he increasingly isolated himself. At the time of his solitary death in 1924, he had been professionally inactive for several years and was a virtual recluse.

Early Life

Louis Singleton Curtiss was born in Belleville, Ontario, on July 1, 1865, the fourth of six children, and the second son of Frances Elvira and Don Carlos Curtiss. His father was a successful dry goods merchant of Canadian origin, with stern face, high forehead, piercing blue eyes, and an unruly red beard. His mother was of French ancestry and had come to Belleville from the Norwalk (Ohio) area 10 years earlier, after the death of her first husband. She supported herself and her infant daughter by teaching painting and the harp in a ladies' academy.

It was apparently from her that Louis inherited his creative talent. She may also have been an inspiration for the garlands that embellish some of his buildings, for the surviving examples of her art depict fruits and vegetables, vines and foliage, with remarkable realism.

When Louis was almost 17, his father died. Fifteen months later, in June, 1884, his mother also died and the family was scattered. Information about this period and the several years that followed is scant. It is known, however, that one of the older twin girls (Agnes Lillian) and the youngest child (Julia-Evang-Evalyn) went to live with their married half-sister, Anna Dwight Crowell Fairbairn, and ultimately moved with her to Weiser, Idaho. Presumably, Louis also went to live with relatives for an unknown period of time.

If he was not already in college at the time of his mother's death, young Louis probably enrolled at the University of Toronto in the fall of 1884. Whether he graduated or left prematurely is not known, but from Toronto he went to Paris, reportedly on a scholarship, to study architecture at the Ecole des Beaux Arts. There is no information about his length of attendance there, nor of his record of accomplishment. Packets of picture postcards that he sent his half-sister suggest that he traveled abroad for a time upon completion of his studies. Apparently he was a poor correspondent, for none of the cards bear messages and no letters from him at any time in his life have been found. It may have been during this period that Mrs. Fairbairn complained about not hearing from him and asked for a picture to assure her that he was well. He sent a small tintype of himself, which shows him in profile, wearing a derby and smoking a big cigar.

Chooses Kansas City

How it happened that Louis Curtiss chose Kansas City as the place to launch his career is a matter of speculation. Well established there were the Corrigan brothers, who had migrated from tiny St. Chrysostome, Quebec, shortly before the Civil War. Tom, the elder, had become prosperous as owner of the Cor-

Continued on page 19



Panels of Carthage Exterior Marble form a striking curtain wall for the 14-story Administration Building at Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company's new Research Center near St. Paul.

The building was designed by the St. Paul architectural firm of Ellerbe & Co. Carthage Exterior Marble for the project was quarried at Carthage, fabricated and installed by Twin City Tile and Marble Co. of Minneapolis.

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rigan Horse Car Railway Company, which he had founded about 1870. When the several independent streetcar lines in the city were consolidated under one ownership, he became president of the Metropolitan Street Railway Company. He also had numerous real estate holdings. His younger brother Bernard was a successful builder. It is reasonable to assume that Curtiss knew of their success and had some contact with these former countrymen. He also must have known that the great commercial prosperity in the Southwest in the 1870's and 1880's had given rise to a building boom in Kansas City, beginning about 1885. Widespread architectural attention had been attracted by a competition held in 1886 for the design of a new Board of Trade Building. All but one of the competing architects were from outside Kansas City, and the commission was won by Chicago's Burnham & Root. During this period, a number of prominent architects forsok established practices in the East to open new offices in Kansas City, hoping to share in its growth and in the building of the expanding West. Foremost among these were Henry Van Brunt, a Fellow of the AIA and its national secretary in 1861, and his partner Frank Maynard Howe, from Boston. Holding such promise both for seasoned architects and for his fellow Canadians, Kansas City was an easy choice for a self-confident and eager beginner like Louis Curtiss. Yet the possibility of his having worked for at least a short time in another city, perhaps Chicago, cannot be ignored, although no confirming evidence has yet been found.

Only Partnership

Louis Curtiss must have arrived in Kansas City about 1890, and soon thereafter joined a young contemporary, Frederick C. Gunn (1865-1959), as partner in the firm of Gunn & Curtiss. Their earliest building was the Missouri State Building, which they designed for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. For two young men in their twenties, winning such a commission must have been a most exciting accomplishment. The only other Missouri firm represented in this great world's fair was the venerable Van Brunt & Howe, members of the

Architectural Commission which conceived the entire investiture for the exposition, and were architects for the Electricity Building in the Court of Honor.

In the course of their association, Gunn & Curtiss also designed the Church at the Soldiers Home in Leavenworth, Kansas; the Progress Club House; and a number of residences in Kansas City and Liberty, Missouri. In association with F. E. Hill, they designed "Oak Hall," the sprawling and frequently enlarged residence of Colonel William Rockhill Nelson, founder of the *Kansas City Star*. Located at 45th and Rockhill Road in Kansas City, it was demolished after the Colonel's death to make way for the construction of the Western Gallery of Art. However long this partnership with Gunn endured, it was the only time that Curtiss practiced in collaboration with another architect.

Establishes Own Firm

During these initial years of his residence in Kansas City, Curtiss lived in an apartment near 13th and Cherry Streets, and as his practice grew so did his affluence and his individuality. He was one of the first men in the city to own and drive an automobile, and was one of the founders of the local auto club. In his high-seated Winton runabout, he became a familiar sight speeding along the boulevards, often in the company of some comely young lady. Later, in the era of "any color car so long as it is black," he characteristically drove a white Maxwell. When cars became quite common, he owned the first European car in Kansas City.

The Baltimore Hotel

The decade or so that followed his partnership with Gunn was a time of great accomplishment for Curtiss. In 1898, he was commissioned by the Corrigan Brothers Realty Company to design his first large project, the Baltimore Hotel. Located on the former site of The Merrill Lumber Company, some of the most valuable property in town, this building became a four-phased project, the first of which was a six-story, 160-room building on the corner of 11th and Baltimore Streets. Although the Corrigan brothers owned the land, Curtiss

Continued on page 21

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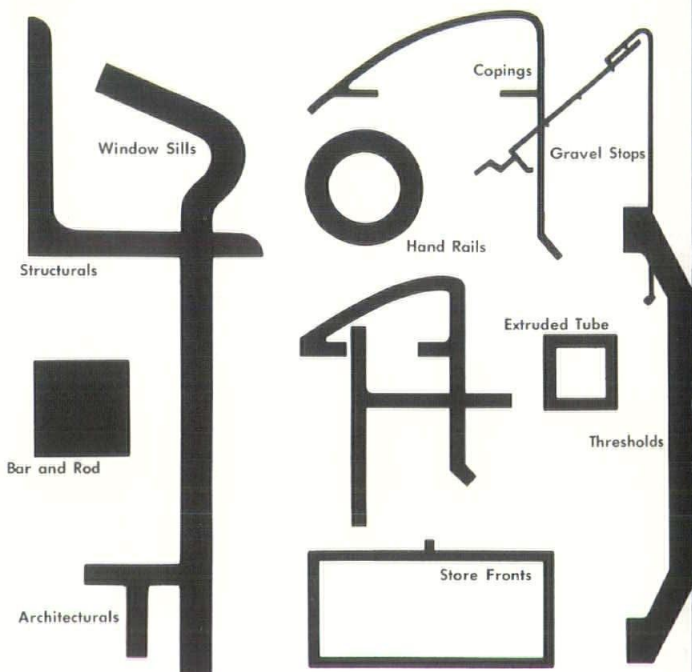
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was actually selected as architect by Ewins and Dean, operators of four hotels in Kansas and Missouri, who persuaded the Corriganes to build for them on this property. As part of the cost of the project, Louis Curtiss was sent to Europe for three months for research.

The initial portion of the Baltimore Hotel (140' x 117') was of wall-bearing masonry construction with interior framing of cast and wrought iron. Both the concrete floor slabs and the plaster partitions were "of expanded-metal construction," an innovation at that time, and the building was one of the first in the city to be considered fireproof. Its brick exterior walls were 4' thick at grade, tapering to 18" at the top, and the cement for the mortar with which they were laid had come from Germany as ballast in sailing ships. In 1901, two stories were added, increasing the number of rooms to 225, and in 1904 the eight stories of wall-bearing construction were extended southward 40'. In the fall of 1907, a 10-story, U-shaped, steel-framed addition was built on the remaining 75' lot, and the main entrance of the hotel was moved to 12th Street. It now totaled some 425 rooms. This addition was framed with steel girders and built-up box columns having 16" wide-flange core sections with channels and flange plates. Column spacing was approximately 25' on centers in both directions.

Officially opened on June 10, 1899, the Baltimore Hotel belonged to the era when Luxury was measured in terms of marble, red plush, and plenty of space. It was one of the most magnificent hotels in the West, and, like the Palmer House in Chicago and the Brown Palace in Denver, it was intended to overwhelm the spectator. Its Peacock Alley dwarfed a similar passage cut through the Willard Hotel in Washington, and all of its public areas were finished in fine "vert antique" scagliola plaster work. There was a Pompeian Room with a great imported marble fountain; a James the First Room with colorful murals; a columned Doric Room; and a Heidelberg Room for men only—all with intricate cast-plaster ornamentation and richly colored stenciled painting. The twin bedrooms could easily ac-

commodate four additional beds and the suites would rival the best of Manhattan apartments. For nearly 40 years, in the most flamboyant days of Kansas City, the Baltimore Hotel was the center of all that was big and important—fashion shows, auto shows, festive parties, and banquets. But these gay days passed, and in 1939 it was torn down to make way for small stores and a parking garage.

The Willis Wood Theater

The Willis Wood Theater was built in about 1902 at the intersection of 11th and Baltimore Streets, diagonally across the street from the Baltimore Hotel. Writing in 1904, Frank Maynard Howe ranked this "among the most important of the later buildings . . . designed by Mr. Louis Curtiss after the modern French school, its front entirely in gray terra cotta." It is said to have been inspired by L'Opera in Paris, and Joe Jefferson, the English actor who played Rip van Winkle for many years, considered it the finest and most beautiful theater in the United States. Running under the street from The Willis Wood to the Baltimore's Heidelberg Room was a white-tiled tunnel, known as Highball Alley, for between-the-acts convenience of thirsty gentlemen.

Legend has it that during construction of The Willis Wood, Louis Curtiss suddenly decided to give a dinner party in the theater. A temporary ramp was built up to the stage, and, on the appointed night, the invited guests picked their way through construction debris to ascend to the banquet table. Waiters from the Baltimore Hotel served the dinner through Highball Alley. Later, while "The Merry Widow" was playing, there was a Christmas banquet for the cast, similarly served in the upstairs foyer. With the advent of Prohibition, Highball Alley lived up to its name by becoming the repository for the Baltimore Hotel's stock of wines and spirits, and from it private parties were supplied for several years.

Other Commissions

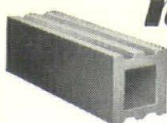
Commissions came in abundance in the following years, including stores, offices, apartments, residences, churches, theaters, banks, and warehouses, with only one major inter-

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ruption to their execution. About 1905, there was a spectacular fire in a stockyard building in "The Bottoms" area of Kansas City near the river. With hordes of others, Curtiss went to watch, and in the crowd he was apparently exposed to smallpox, which meant he had to be isolated for the next three months.

In the early years of this century, the West was still a wilderness. Foremost among those who helped to civilize it were the people of the Santa Fe Railroad and the Fred Harvey system, and in 1905 Curtiss began to do work for both. In 1906, the famous El Bisonte Hotel was built from his plans in Hutchinson, Kansas, followed in 1907 by Harvey Houses and depots in Emporia, Syracuse, and Wellington, Kansas. In 1909, the little El Ortiz Hotel was built in Alamogordo, New Mexico. He also designed an addition to the El Tovar in Grand Canyon, Arizona, and a hotel and restaurant in Sweetwater, Texas. In 1911, the Joplin, Missouri, Union Terminal was built, and in 1912 The Union Terminal in Wichita, his largest up to that time. The Bernard Corrigan House was completed in 1913.

His growing reputation in this field attracted other clients. For the Rock Island Railroad he designed a depot in Moline, Illinois. For the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railway he designed an office building, a hotel, help's quarters, and a depot in Kingsville, Texas. The hotel, at least, was completed. For the S. L. and S. F. Railway, he planned depots, restaurants, and other structures in Victoria, Vanderbilt, and Harlingen, Texas, and Hugo, Oklahoma; for the G. I. and S. F. Railway, a hotel and restaurant in addition in Temple, Texas; and for the R. & A. T. Railway, depots in Sweetwater, Snyder, Post, and Lubbock, Texas. Two renderings made in 1910 for large terminals suggest that Louis Curtiss also entered the railroad-sponsored competition for the design of the Union Station in Kansas City, which was ultimately won by Jarvis Hunt, nephew of the first president of the AIA.

Lovely Kansas City Lady

These were the years of prosperity and prominence for Louis Curtiss, probably the

busiest and happiest of his life, and sometime early in their course his one great romance developed. She was a lovely young Kansas City lady twelve years his junior, and although her father disapproved of their friendship because of the difference in their ages, they were together as frequently as possible. Each year on Christmas Eve, they would roam through the stores with a vast supply of money, and he would impulsively buy gifts for her, for her two young nieces, and for his few close friends. One winter's night, when she was convalescing from an illness, he arrived at her door in a carriage specially heated by braziers. After warming several flowing scarves by her fireside, he wrapped them about her and whisked her out to the carriage for a drive. With one or both of her nieces, she often visited his apartment and at these times he always had small surprise packages hidden about the place for the little girls to find. Unwrapping the gifts was usually an anticlimax, but on one occasion he gave the older girl a beautiful unset cameo. Louis told her he had found it while searching through old ruins in Italy and that someday it would be cherished. She remembers him as a strange, dramatic man who told fascinating stories.

Late in 1907 or early in 1908, the romance ended with the young lady's marriage to another man. Curtiss was close to few people and this was a great blow to him. It may well have been the cause of his increasing withdrawal. He never married, ostensibly because he felt that marriage encroached too greatly on the work of an investigator, and exacted vows that were seldom honored. But he did not become a misogynist, for he maintained that women should be given every possible advantage in education, since the duties of a home usually cut them off from the daily learning that man acquires as he combats the world.

First Metal-Glass Curtain Wall

The year 1908 was one of great achievement as well as great disappointment for Curtiss, for in April construction was started on a six-story building for The Boley Clothing Company, on the northwest corner of 12th and Walnut Streets in Kansas City. More of a detriment

Continued on page 25



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an asset to his professional reputation at the time, this was a building of revolutionary design for its day, and it may well reflect his attitude in the wake of his shattered romance. Man makes his greatest strides in times of adversity, and this is the masterpiece of Louis Curtiss. Pointing the way for the future, and departing completely from established tradition, it is enclosed in flat planes of glass and steel and is conspicuously lacking in the ornamentation and overhanging cornices then so popular. It was considered stark and barren, even ugly, but in reality it anticipated by more than 40 years the entire range of metal-and-glass curtain-wall construction that became the architectural idiom beginning in the 1950's. Not until Willis Polk's Hallidie Building, begun in 1915 in San Francisco, was there an exterior of comparable importance. Still in use today, the Boley Building is a steel-framed structure, possible the first in which rolled wide-flange sections were used in lieu of build-up members for the columns of a building. Its floors are cantilevered beyond the columns about 5 ft., spandrel plates of painted steel express the presence of these floors, while sheets of glass exclude the weather.

A four-story derivative of The Boley Building was built at 624 Olive Street in St. Louis in the spring of 1910, for William A. Gill and the occupancy of the Ideal Clothing Company. It also still stands in good condition.

The two-story store that was built at 1105 McGee Street in May, 1906, was undoubtedly a prototype of The Boley Building. In one respect it was of even greater significance, for it anticipated the buildings of today in which the floors are suspended from rooftop trusses. Not only its facade of plate glass, sheet copper, and terra cotta, but also the entire floor structure for the bays directly behind the facade were suspended by 1½"-square steel hangers from a 42" plate girder at the roof line. The three-story store at 3240 Main Street, built about the same time, appears to be of similar construction, but so far as is known Curtiss had no further opportunity to explore suspended building structures.

Designs Own Office Building

By the summer of 1908, with the Baltimore Hotel additions virtually completed and The Boley Building and various railroad projects well in progress, Louis Curtiss was well established, financially affluent, and spending freely. Fearing that he would squander all his recent gains, his friend and mentor Bernard Corrigan encouraged him to build for his own security in later years. Accordingly, in December, 1908, Curtiss began construction of a three-story concrete-framed building (46' x 115') for himself on land leased for 99 years at 1118 McGee Street in downtown Kansas City. This also was a glass-fronted building, with mullions and spandrels of cypress covered with painted galvanized steel sheet, a type of construction common early in this century. Casement windows were of wood, and mosaic tile bands in red, blue, and yellow accented the spandrel areas. On the ground floor were stores, on the second floor his office and drafting room, and on the third his living quarters.

Louis Curtiss apparently always had only a small office staff consisting of himself, an assistant architect, a chief draftsman, and a teen-aged apprentice as "tracer" and messenger. So far as is known, he did all his own structural design work. Biographical notes on architect Frederick E. McIlvaine (1873-1927) indicate that he began his architectural training under Curtiss while still in his teens, and remained in his office for a number of years, ultimately becoming the assistant architect. Before leaving to open his own office, he worked on a number of the important Curtiss buildings, including the Baltimore Hotel and the Willis Wood Theater. The only other person whom it has been possible to identify as having worked in the office is an F. S. Wilson, who later worked for the city.

Neither pictures nor drawings of the Curtiss apartment at 1118 McGee Street have been found. Although it has long since been demolished, a description does exist and reveals it to have been an unusual place quite in keeping with the character of its occupant. Both living room and bedroom flanked a rooftop

Continued on page 29

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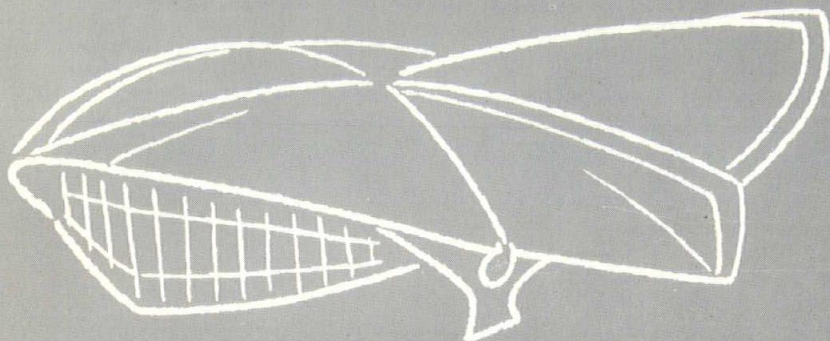
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courtyard and surveyed the city through walls of floor-to-ceiling glass. Among the major features of the living room were a wall of inset bookshelves faced with sliding plate glass; a central ceiling recess from which hung light globes on black cords of different lengths; a battery-powered clock whose decorative face was flush-mounted in the wall; a huge black crystal-topped table; numerous niches for *objects d'art* and flowers; an illuminated glass drawing board hinged to the wall; and a phonograph in a cabinet of his own design beside which stood an electrified tower of translucent ivory for a solitary light source when listening to music.

On one side of the living room was a dining alcove and on its widest wall a painting with simple narrow black frame. On the table stood a bronze lamp with a figurine standing in the cup of a lotus flower. In the base of the lamp, a horizontal electric fan was mounted to blow the air upwards. Opposite this alcove was a recessed lounge or day bed on a dais, and concealed behind it a ventilator to admit night air.

Period of Meditation

Although for a time he continued to be reasonably busy, the Curtiss fortunes began to wane in 1913, when his greatest patron, Bernard Corrigan, suddenly died. Residential work at this time included the A.M. Riegelman House built in 1914 for Curtiss' friends, the Norman Romanhousers; the Wookey House, Toronto, Canada, built about 1915, was the last house he designed. With the outbreak of World War I, his practice came to a virtual standstill. Hopefully, he often said that when the "Big Money" began to spend again his practice would resume, but it never did.

Naturally incapable of idleness, Curtiss became completely engrossed in what he called "Graphic Statics," experiments in the relationship of the principles of solid geometry to the art of building, particularly in reinforced concrete. His office became cluttered with celluloid models of all shapes and sizes with which he could visually demonstrate, at scale, the workings of stresses in structural members as loads were applied. In connection with this work, he is said to have carried on an extensive correspondence with a professor in Cam-

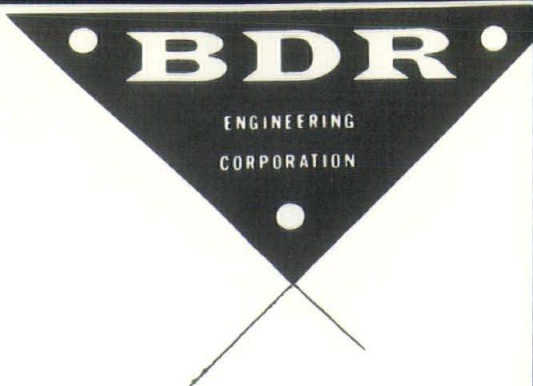
bridge, England. Lost in intense concentration, Curtiss would sit for hours before these models, oblivious to chance visitors. Few people understood what he was doing, and most of those who were aware of it believed he had completely lost his mind. Since his inherent eccentricities did little to dispell this impression, he became increasingly withdrawn and alone. Now having little use for the upper floors of his building, he built several small office suites and apartments and rented them to a doctor, a dentist, and some struggling young artists. These tenants, as well as a tall, lanky, and devoted Negro servant named Walter, who cooked and kept house for him, became his principal contacts with society.

About 9 o'clock on the evening of June 24, 1924, while working at the drawing board in his apartment, Curtiss was seized with a violent coughing spell. Alone and unable to summon aid, he died of a ruptured aortic aneurysm. Probably at his own direction, he was buried in an unmarked grave in Mt. Washington Cemetery, Kansas City.

Though he left a certain imprint on our architectural heritage, the spark of greatness in Louis Curtiss was neither fully realized nor widely recognized. Little remains now to recall his life, except for a few old buildings and two noble inscriptions on a storeroom wall.

About the Author

Mr. Comee first became aware of Louis Curtiss in 1957 when he saw The Boley Building during a visit to Kansas City. His curiosity aroused by the total lack of information about its architect, he began a sparetime search for Louis Curtiss in the course of his nationwide travels for the Construction Market Development Division, United States Steel Corporation. Many architects and laymen around the country provided information, photographs, and assistance, and Mr. Comee wishes to acknowledge in particular the kind interest and help of the following: Mr. Angus McCallum, AIA; Mr. Gerre Jones, former Executive Secretary of the Kansas City Chapter, AIA; Mr. James Jackson, retired Real Estate Editor, Kansas City Star; Mr. Loomis E. Phillips, Division of Buildings and Inspections, Kansas City; Mr. Tom Menaugh, The Fred Harvey System, Chicago, Illinois; Mr. Charles O. Coverley, The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway System, Chicago, Illinois; Mr. Alex C. Rindskopf, Wilmette, Illinois; and Mrs. Robert L. Shorey, Long Beach, California.



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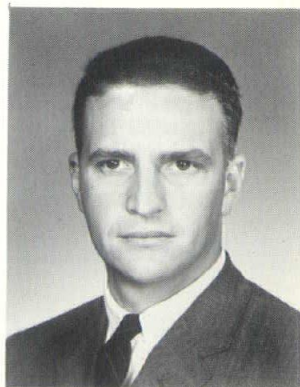
Northeast High School, Kansas City, Mo. (graduated 1944)
 Northeast State Teacher's College, Kirksville, Mo. (1 year)
 Kansas City Junior College, Kansas City, Mo. (2 years)
 Draftsman, Harry L. Wagner & Associates, 1955-1960
 Architect, Burns & McDonnell, 1962-present
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 Draftsman, Geis-Hunter-Ramos, 1960-1961
 Draftsman, Richard C. Peters, Lawrence, Kans. (half-time-1961)
 Draftsman, Lawrence Good, Lawrence, Kans. (half-time-1962)
 Draftsman, Monroe & Lefebvre, Kansas City, Mo., 1962-1963
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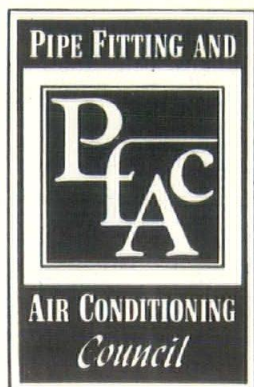
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