# THE JOURNEY to NOW

## Eighty Years in the Making of a Museum
## Part II: The Early Years, 1940 through 1950s

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**Science Fair participants, circa 1947**

In 1940, John Ripley Forbes came to the Kansas City Museum to become its first director. He had learned about the new museum and showed up from his home state of Massachusetts offering his services free of charge until the museum got on its feet.

Forbes was eager to create a museum with a living collection. Originally, only the first floor of Corinthian Hall, which has four floors, was utilized for a museum; however, with the help of volunteers and a labor force from the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Forbes filled each room of the mansion as quickly as they could be rehabilitated. In addition, WPA workers transformed the Conservatory building (originally used by the Long family to house winter plants) as a place where live animals could be viewed and touched by touring school groups.

Forbes encouraged exhibition and interpretation of natural history, and he secured private support and gifts of specimens to the Kansas City Museum. Dr. Richard Sutton, a world traveler, big game hunter, and ardent supporter of the museum, often lent his collection of specimens. This collection became so large that it necessitated its own area for display. Sutton's children later assisted the museum in establishing permanent natural history displays in their father's memory.

In addition to Forbes, and within months of opening the Kansas City Museum in 1940, a women's auxiliary was formed to raise funds, as well as create a historic fashion collection, for the new Kansas City Museum Association — an organization formed to create the museum. Known as the Women's Division, they were led by Lorraine Shields Page. To differentiate themselves from

A view from the upper floor of Corinthian Hall looking down on arriving school buses, circa 1950

the married matrons of the Division, another younger auxiliary formed and became known as the Musettes; these single women became the museum's docents. These two auxiliaries sustained the museum through several decades and well into the 1970s.

Opening just before WWII, the museum's resources were strained. Within a few years of opening, the museum lost its director as well as much of its WPA labor force to the war. Forbes was drafted in early 1942; he hoped by claiming conscientious objector status he could remain at the museum. It backfired, and he received major news coverage and letters to the editor. In the end, he was forced to resign. With no director and few workers, rationing the expense of maintaining the large mansion, the Kansas City Museum Association chose to close its doors for the duration of the war.

Forbes' successors expanded the natural history program. The former dining room and adjacent sunroom in Corinthian Hall were devoted to the display of the ever-growing collection. During this first decade of the museum's operation, the former Carriage House — having served as the garage from 1935 to 1939 — was restored by WPA workers as the "Museum Annex." Forbes envisioned the space as a combination lecture hall and school group classroom.

The post-war years for the Kansas City Museum were initially stressful until an agreement was made with the City of Kansas City, Missouri, to take over ownership of the buildings and grounds. Upon reopening, the museum faced a financial crisis that eventually led to offering the museum and "all exhibits" to the City. The museum was sold to the City in 1948, with the Kansas City Museum Association and its small staff staying on to manage the museum.

The City's involvement freed the Kansas City Museum Association staff and volunteers to concentrate on exhibits and programming in the 1950s. The museum relied heavily on their two auxiliaries to augment the work of raising money and continuing their educational programming. The museum co-sponsored the City's first Science Fair, held at the museum a few years before it got too big to continue there.

The Women's Division worked diligently to raise funds, which benefited the museum greatly. Corinthian Hall's original elevator was restored, allowing greater access to the upper levels, thanks to the Women's Division. A portion of the lower level of Corinthian Hall was remodeled into a kitchen and lunchroom to feed school groups with money raised by the auxiliary. In concert with R.A. Long's daughters Sally Ellis and Loula Long Combs, The R.A. Long Planetarium was created in the former Conservatory.

In these early years, the Kansas City Museum was a combination of history, science, anthropology, and natural history exhibits and experiences. The museum hosted school groups from around the Greater Kansas City Metropolitan region and could not have done so without the support of both the Women's Division and

Entrance to the museum's beloved igloo, ready to open with hand painted backdrops, circa 1954

the Musettes, who were the museum's tour guides. They gave countless guided tours to schoolkids and adults alike. In addition, they took the museum out to the public, providing programs all over the area.

One of the museum's most popular exhibits in these early decades was "Eskimo Land," completed in 1954 and featuring the "life-size" igloo. This large exhibition on the third floor of Corinthian Hall featured two large polar bears mounted in standing poses. The room is fondly recalled by many visitors of that generation for its igloo, from which children could climb into and out. The temporary inhabitants of the igloo, in its "refrigerated" room, could be viewed through a glass porthole open in the side. Yes, to this day, museum visitors share their special stories of the igloo.

Our journey on the life of the museum continues in the July/August issue.