

THE JOURNEY to NOW

Eighty Years in the Making of a Museum Part I: From Private Estate to Public Museum, 1910 to 1940

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Corinthian Hall on opening day, May 5, 1940.

KANSAS CITY MUSEUM

Every good story has a cast of interesting characters, an appealing or curious setting, a plot with twists and turns, a conflict that seems insurmountable, and a resolution that brings transformation. The story of the Kansas City Museum has all that and more. As we prepare for a grand reopening of Corinthian Hall in 2021, we aim to tell the story of the museum's evolution over time because the history of this institution matters, and its renovation and future have been informed by its past.

The story of the Kansas City Museum begins with Robert Alexander Long. Born in 1850, he came from a well-established Kentucky farming family. He landed in Kansas City, where his banker uncle Churchill White sent him west to establish himself. After several unsuccessful ventures, Long sold off lumber from a failed hay business, and he stumbled into an industry that was the

basis of his substantial fortune. He started in Columbus, Kansas, where he met and married his wife, Ella, a Pennsylvania Quaker, in 1875. Along with partner Victor Bell, the Long-Bell Lumber Company was incorporated in 1884.

Mr. and Mrs. Long had two children, Sally and Loula. The family moved to Kansas City, Missouri, in 1891 with Long's burgeoning business. In 1907, the Longs embarked on the construction of an estate reflecting their local and national prominence, moving three houses off the property to create a 70-room, stone-faced mansion and related buildings that filled an entire city block. The property overlooked picturesque North Terrace Park (now Kessler Park), which offered a convenient place for Long and his horse-loving daughter, Loula, to exercise their prize steeds.

The Long Family private estate featured six buildings designed by architect Henry Hoit, all contained within a wrought iron fence around the square block of the property: Corinthian Hall, the four-story mansion; the Carriage House with a Paddock Area, in which Mr. Long's famed equestrienne daughter, Loula, housed her horses and many trophies; the Horse Trainer's Home, which served as the home for trainer Dave Smith and his family; Gardener's Tool Shop and Planting Shed (also called the Carpenter's Shed); the Conservatory (which became the museum's Planetarium in the 1950s); and the Greenhouse (which is no longer on the property).

The Long family lived at their estate until the death of Mr. Long in 1934; Mrs. Long passed away in 1928, and the two Long daughters were married and living elsewhere. After the deaths of Mr. and Mrs. Long, the estate underwent extensive changes. Daughters Sally and Loula removed decorative items and architectural features from Corinthian Hall for installation in their own homes. Additionally, they held a two-day auction in the Fall of 1934 to sell the remainder of the items in Corinthian Hall.

After this auction, the estate was put up for sale — a tough task during the Great Depression. Long's heirs had a white elephant of a mansion that sat empty for five years, with its caretaker, Olive Hoggins, working hard behind the scenes to find a good use for the buildings and grounds. In 1939, Sally and Loula donated the entire property to the newly formed Kansas City Museum Association for use as a public museum. Finally, the Kansas City Museum opened its doors on May 5, 1940, with only a small portion of Corinthian Hall available for public exhibitions.

The fledgling organization had no problem procuring artifacts. The Kansas City Public Library had been displaying a collection owned by the Board of Education for many years called the Dyer Collection of Native American objects; this collection had been supplemented over the years and came to be known as The Dyer Museum. With the arrival of a new history museum on the scene, the Kansas City Public Library — and Board of Education — were more than willing to turn the collection over to the Kansas City Museum. In addition, the Missouri Valley Historical Society, a local group that never had a home to showcase their historical collections, merged with the newly formed Kansas City Museum Association, bringing with them a core collection of Kansas City history to the new museum.

During those first few months of operation, among the hundreds of items delivered to the Kansas City Museum were many mounted animals, birds, and insects, which were exhibited throughout the available space. A large mounted buffalo sat in the center of the Dining Room of Corinthian Hall while above it a large section of a whale bone was suspended from a truss system.

In 1940, John Ripley Forbes came to the Kansas City Museum. 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. He became the museum's first director. As a Reader's Digest profile of Forbes recounted in 1947, he borrowed \$100, jumped in his car, and materialized in Kansas City unannounced. Forbes was eager to create a museum with a living collection. While only at the museum for a brief period, he had a

lasting impact and would go on to have an incredible career as a naturalist, conservationist, and educator, helping to create museums around the country.

After Forbes, the Kansas City Museum's life as a public museum left a deep and memorable impression on a generation of Kansas Citians. Our story of the museum continues in the May/June issue.



KANSAS CITY MUSEUM

Robert Alexander Long, circa 1927



KANSAS CITY MUSEUM

John Ripley Forbes with a buffalo in the Dining Room, April 1940