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IMPACT *of* VOLUNTEERING

Fueling Growth, Connection, and Shaping Our Community

Gone but not Forgotten



Memorial Union 1927



Memorial Stadium 1920

The history behind the building of Kansas Memorial Stadium and the Kansas Union includes memorializing those who served and died in World War I.

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photos courtesy Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries.

Following World War I, The University of Kansas (KU) administrators felt it was important to honor the 129 students and alumni who died during that conflict. Some of them were killed in action, and some died from influenza. A KU graduate from the class of 1912, Lt. Dr. William T. Fitzsimons, was the first American officer killed in action. In the fall of 1920, the university launched its Million Dollar Drive to create a memorial to the KU students and alumni who had died. The Memorial Corporation was created to oversee the fundraising. A number of structures were considered, but the university ultimately decided on a football stadium and a student union. It was believed that the university needed these two structures on the campus rather than them being memorials.

Football was being played at McCook's Field. It had wooden bleachers that were "not only unsightly and hazardous as to fire and decay, but they were exceedingly uncomfortable." Clement C. Williams, a civil engineering professor, noted that "such leading universities as Princeton, Harvard, Yale and Michigan, had all recently built giant stadiums, so there were a number of different facilities KU could emulate." Dr. Forrest C. "Phog" Allen was the director of athletics in 1920, and he toured the stadiums at a number of eastern universities. On his return, he proposed a U-shaped stadium that would include a track. The stadium would have seating for an estimated 32,000 fans.

To kick off the drive, the university developed a promotional brochure titled "Why we need a stadium." It included a number of statements from prominent KU supporters about why the readers should support the Million Dollar Drive. James Naismith wrote that alumni should "act at once by backing the stadium project with their financial as well as moral support." The brochure stated that a new stadium would "have an attractiveness and dignity that will justify on our part an attitude of pride." It also encouraged KU students, faculty and friends to not be laggards, because "other schools throughout the country are rapidly swinging into line."

The financial campaign opened officially on Nov. 18, 1920. The timing was providential because it was just a few days after the KU football team, perennial losers to Nebraska, earned a 20-20 tie. The outcome of the game was enough to excite the student body and alumni to support the campaign for a new football stadium. In two weeks, students and faculty had pledged \$225,000. The *University Daily Kansan*, the student newspaper, wrote that a new mood was apparent on campus and that "not losing to

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Nebraska was just the first sign that the University had entered a new era of growth that would end with KU becoming the biggest and best in the Middle West.” In the following weeks, the 4,226 students pledged \$190,000 to the stadium project. Posters carried messages such as “every student a giver” and “the Alumni are watching us now.” Even the long-standing rivalry with the University of Missouri was noted on a poster as “Another way to beat Missouri.” KU faculty members pledged another \$35,000.

The Million Dollar Campaign had received \$850,000 in pledges by the fall of 1922. Of course, pledges were not actual donations. By September 1931, only \$655,000 of the total amount of \$965,000 had been paid.

In the spring of 1921, the first step in building the new stadium occurred with the destruction of McCook Field. Chancellor Ernest Lindley designated May 10 “Stadium Day” when several hundred male students volunteered to tear down the bleachers in 78 minutes. More than 4,000 people participated in the festivities, which included lunch, speeches and games. The conclusion of the day saw Chancellor Lindley, dressed in overalls, drive a tractor pulling a plow through the middle of the old football field.

Construction of the new stadium began on July 16, 1921, and it was dedicated on Nov. 11, 1922. In addition to honoring the 129 KU men and women killed during World War 1, it was also a commemoration of Armistice Day. Following a parade led by the Kansas American Legion, a rifle salute, the playing of “Taps” and speeches by Gov. Henry J. Allen and Chancellor Lindley rounded out the dedication ceremony. There was also a football game against Nebraska, which KU did not win.

The laying of the cornerstone for the Kansas Memorial Union occurred on April 30, 1926, and honored the 129 KU students who died during World War I. Approximately 3,000 people attended the event, including students, faculty, staff, families of those who were being honored and soldiers. A banner with 3,000 stars recognizing everyone in the KU community who served in World War I was hanging on the front of the podium. The center of the flag contained 129 gold stars for those who died during the conflict. The Crimson and Blue band played “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and the singing of it was led by the two university glee clubs. After an invocation, Thomas J. Norton, Chicago, who earned his law degree from KU, gave an address that stressed patriotism and upholding the U.S. constitution. An honor guard placed a copper box containing a copy of the Memorial Corporation’s charter; the school catalog for 1915 through 1926; a photo of Gov. Ben Paulen; two drawings of the Jayhawk; front pages of the Kansas City Star for Aug. 2, 1914, with headlines announcing war had been declared and for Nov. 11, 1918, reporting that an armistice had been negotiated; pages from 11 regional newspapers that had helped promote or had stories about the Million Dollar Drive to erect the Union; the Stadium and the Uncle Jimmy Green Statue; three issues of the *Graduate Magazine* describing KU history and traditions; and three roses. An honor guard of KU war veterans lowered the box into the cornerstone. A student representing all KU students believed the Union would be a place on campus for making lifelong friendships. Chancellor Lindley stated the “war dead would live on by being remembered by the living.” The ceremony ended with the singing of “Crimson and the Blue.”

The stadium was completed in 1927, but it took a number of years before the union was completed. The Memorial Corporation had adopted a policy of “pay as you build,” and the construction of the union was halted when funds ran out. The Great Depression impacted work on the Memorial Union, as well. In 1938, a small 80- by 135-foot union was completed. The name “Memorial” was discontinued in the 1940s, and the building was then known as the Kansas Union.

On Veterans Day 2019, the archway at the entrance of the Kansas Union was rededicated to honor the 129 students who died in World War I. The archway contains 129 stars. The stars would be lit that night at 11 p.m., the time that the armistice was signed. The director of the KU Union said during the rededication ceremony: “Those stars will shine, hopefully, eternally from here on out, recognizing that sacrifice for all. We’re proud and have a sacred obligation to fulfill here.”

The sixth floor of the union has a plaque listing the names of the 129 students who died. On the adjacent wall are photographs of all the students honored.

At the beginning of World War I, the United States Regular Army was small. Its numbers were increased by relying on volunteers and draftees. The National Army was created by the War Department in 1917. It was a combined force of volunteers and conscripts. It included men who had volunteered to serve in units of the National Guard. These men were added to the Regular Army, which was in existence at the start of the war. The National Army was disbanded at the end of World War I.

By that time, nearly 72% of American soldiers were draftees, with the remaining 27% of the force being volunteers. More than 80,000 Kansans served in the U.S. armed forces during World War I. 2,212 Kansans died from various causes during the conflict—569 were killed in action; 215 died from wounds received during fighting; 1,285 died from disease; and 143 died from accidents and other causes. The numbers of those who died were broken down by the classes of service among the National Army made up of draftees and volunteers, National Guard soldiers who were volunteers and the Regular Army whose soldiers were already serving in the army. Deaths for these groups were 1,463 for the National Army, 403 for the National Guard and 237 for the Regular Army. These citizen soldiers (volunteers and draftees) made great sacrifices for their country, as did the 129 soldiers from KU that were memorialized with the construction of a football stadium and a student union. ▲



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