

THE JOURNEY to NOW

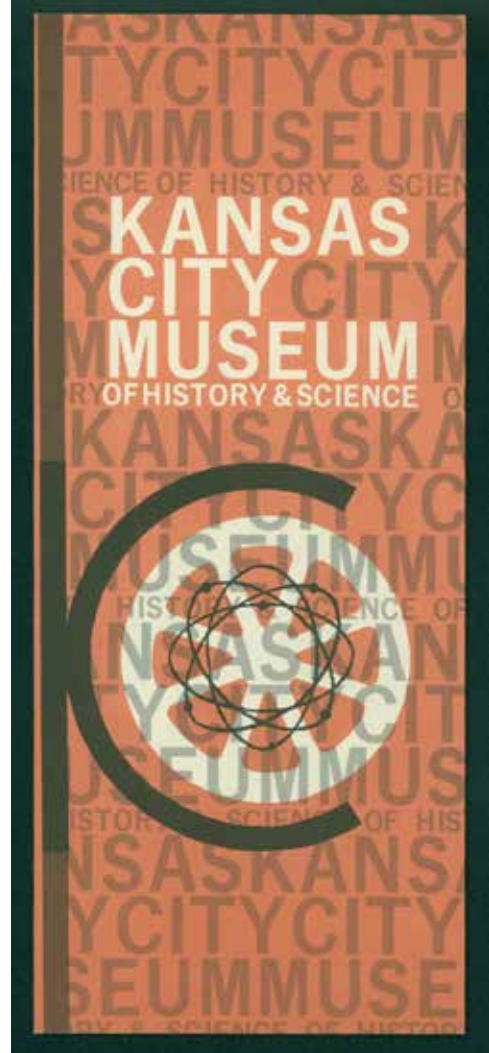
Eighty Years in the Making of a Museum

Part III: A Focus on Natural History & Science, 1950s through 1970s



IMAGES COURTESY KANSAS CITY MUSEUM

R. A. Long Planetarium equipment, c. 1960.



New brochure with new name, c. 1960-70.

By Denise Morrison and Anna Marie Tuter

In addition to the famous “life-size igloo,” natural history and science exhibits took center stage at the Kansas City Museum in the 1950s and 1960s. To accommodate these new themes, the Carriage House underwent a major renovation, Corinthian Hall housed new exhibits that became some of the most popular in its history, and the long-underused Conservatory was completely renovated to become the Planetarium. The museum board of trustees even chose to officially change the name of the institution to the Kansas City Museum of History and Science around 1960.

In the early 1950s, the Conservatory, or Solarium (originally used for storing outdoor plants in the winter), was transformed into the R.A. Long Planetarium. The renovation was made possible from the fundraising efforts of the Women’s Division, the museum’s auxiliary, and through a generous donation by Sally Long Ellis and Loula Long Combs (daughters of R.A. Long and his wife, Ella). Seating 50 (at best), it served as the City’s only planetarium for more than 40 years.



Habitat/dioramas showing original backgrounds, c. 1970.

In 1951, taxidermy specimen displays expanded into the basement of Corinthian Hall, along with mineralogical exhibits of fossils, rocks, and minerals. A new board trustee, Arthur Popham, Jr., took an active role in developing improved displays of mounted animals, placing specimens in naturalistic settings. Mr. Popham and many others believed that dynamic taxidermy displays filled with mounted specimens procured in the wild would contribute to an understanding of natural systems and encourage conservation of species and habitats. Such dioramas created lifelike exhibits but were increasingly inconsistent with the Beaux-Arts decorative interior of Corinthian Hall.

By 1953, Harold Yokum was hired as Curator of Natural History, and former WPA Museum worker Wilber Phillips was named staff artist (Phillips would become the museum's director in the late 1960s). Yokum and Phillips realized Mr. Popham's vision of the "Natural History Halls" by renovating the Carriage House. The first floor of the Carriage House became a designated space for the natural history displays and an auditorium or lecture hall, and the second floor became a workshop for exhibit preparators. The museum's commitment to natural history included the hiring of a staff taxidermist, who prepared specimens for display and taught classes on the second floor.

One of the museum's most popular exhibits/dioramas was also one of its most challenging. The Kansas City Star's Jan. 8, 1954, headline read "Big Bear Is Problem." Mr. Popham's donation of three Alaskan bears was proving difficult to mount and display in the Carriage House. To place one standing erect meant that the ceiling had to be raised two feet. Working with a city engineer, the feat was accomplished. A large domed enclosure was erected, and a panoramic scene depicting a typical bear habitat was painted. On Oct. 23, 1955, the Alaskan Brown Bear habitat was dedicated as a centerpiece of the new Natural History Halls.

While the museum at one time exhibited several large African mammal specimens, efforts to expand on the subject were met with limited success. At the beginning of 1954, the Kansas City Zoo's popular Cleo the Hippo died. Plans were immediately put into place to make Cleo the centerpiece of a new display of African wildlife at the museum. A "Committee for Continuing Cleo" and a public campaign ("Coins for Cleo") began but there was considerable trouble achieving funding goals. The expense could not be met, and the expanded African displays were never realized.

The habitats in the museum's Natural History Halls were all completed by the early 1960s. A new facade was installed on the front of the Carriage House, and the building was named "Arthur Popham Natural History Halls." The 1960s were a time of growth for the museum's

programming featuring successful lectures, school tours, and new auxiliary organizations. The Kansas City Museum Natural Science Society was formed; chief among their activities was sponsoring safaris and expeditions to gather additional specimens. However, by the late 1960s, there were shifting attitudes toward big game hunting. The idea that hunting could be a nature conservation activity seemed contradictory to many. Coupled with growing concern for endangered species, the Society's objectives secured less and less support from museum donors, and they disbanded.

Since the 1950s, the museum staff realized that Corinthian Hall was too small to do all the great things it could be doing. With the increased emphasis on natural history and an expansion of exhibits at Corinthian Hall, the staff decided it was time to separate the two main focuses of the museum (history and science) and work toward finding a new building for the science exhibits and programs. In the late 1960s, a plan was drafted to create a brand-new underground science museum and planetarium near the Liberty Memorial site. When that proved untenable, museum staff and civic leaders looked to the increasingly empty Union Station as a potential site for a new science museum. Despite three vigorous campaigns in the 1970s and early 1980s, voters would not approve a tax increase to help make that dream happen.

With no new building on the horizon and nearing its 50th anniversary in 1990, the museum staff and board had to ask itself, "Where do we go from here? How does a museum remain viable in an ever-changing community if it doesn't change with it?" In the coming years, these questions would dominate everything the museum did.

Our journey on the life of the museum continues in the September/October issue.