

Understanding the True Character of the West Bottoms: Appreciating the “Why” in the History

Prologue:

I was recently asked to spend a few minutes reviewing the history of the West Bottoms. That is would not be an easy assignment even if I had several hours. So instead I will touch on the area’s lesser known history that may account for the area’s distinctive and enduring character.

Let me explain my approach. Long ago, I discovered that the meaning of life events could only be understood by learning the “why” that was behind events, not the “what” of them. This note is an attempt to address a couple of important “whys” that that just may have anchored the very existence of the West Bottoms.

Focus:

I want you to permit yourself to think of the images you might associate with the West Bottoms. You would not be in error if you considered Indian villages, French traders, keel boats, paddle steamers, wagons, overland trails, slave exodus, railroads, cattle, livestock exchanges, packing houses, American Royal, passenger trains, the Union Depot, elevated rail lines, floods, highways, bridges, blight, redevelopment and a new port.

Honestly, in thinking about this area, have you ever asked the question, “Considering the formidable topological challenges and vulnerabilities of this area, why in the world are we here?” To really understand the West bottoms you must first know the answer to this question. If you can answer this question you will most likely know why it persists in the face of unforgiving odds.

Commerce:

In general terms, the main “why” behind much of the development of this area can be summarized in one word, namely, “Commerce.” And interestingly enough it has been a very single minded economic pursuit that has characterized the region.

People do tend to go to the craziest places if residing there holds the promise of wealth. So what were the riches here that our ancestors were trying to harvest? Would you believe it was beaver pelts? Well, in the 1800’s there was a great demand for beaver pelts back east. As early as 1799 the French established a permanent trading post in the West Bottoms to gather pelts from friendly Kansa & Pawnee Indians. I know you have heard that Lewis & Clark explored this area in 1804 and 1806 as they sought to survey the Louisiana Purchase. Now you know they discovered more than a few Indians here. They found that the French had the beginnings of a very successful trading business here with the local Indian Tribes.

In fact, alert to the trading opportunities with the Indians, the prominent mercantile Chouteau family of Frenchmen from St. Louis actively began to develop the area and supplied the trading posts. By 1840 around 26 French speaking families were scattered around the West Bottoms trading with Indians and farming the area. The trading post encampment was called ‘Chez le Canses [Shay-Lu- Con-Says] (Village of the Kansa).”

The success of the Chouteau enterprise received a unexpected boost in 1825 when a treaty with the Indians in Missouri was concluded following the admission of Missouri as a State in 1821. With this treaty the numerous Indian tribes then residing in Missouri conceded to move to the Kansas Territory provided they were given protected land and lifelong annuities.

The importance of this treaty cannot be underestimated regarding the origins of our presence here. With the founding of Fort Leavenworth & Fort Scott to keep white men out of Indian Territory, the trading villages of West Port and the Town of Kansas became the closest trading posts to the Indian protectorates in the Kansas territory where river access was also available to St. Louis. And these were now very special Indians. They had both cash and skins to trade. It should not surprise anyone to learn there was a rather permanent Indian village in the West Bottoms.

The river trade between St. Louis and this area quickly grew as did the delivery systems. The success of the trading posts brought English speaking traders from St. Louis. While the French language disappeared, the early influence of the French remained as the "West Bottoms" was then known as the French Bottoms.

The point I am trying to make is that the reason we became anchored to this practically untenable and very vulnerable piece of real estate was its proximity to friendly Indians with beaver pelts and as a result of a treaty that established protected borders and annuities.

Interestingly, Chouteau, after developing the Indian Trade, witnessed the growth of the overland trade and immigration routes. As a result, he made a successful transition to the second anchor of the area's existence, the outfitting of the overland trade and immigration routes.

Now skipping ahead in time, a third anchoring element appeared that outstripped all the others, namely, the appearance of the railroad. Do you know why the railroad came here? What was the beaver equivalent? Ah, Longhorn Cattle. The county was rapidly growing as was the need for Texas cattle. Cattle drives were horribly time consuming. Some drives actually went from Texas to Chicago and later to St. Louis. However, you could only move longhorn Cattle about 16 miles per day. Any more than that and they lost weight. So each day they had to have time to graze. As the cattle went though increasingly settled areas they began to run into farms or should I say eat their way through farms. This was before fencing. Farmers began to resist these long drives. In fact, famous cattle towns like Abilene completely abandoned cattle drives because of farming.

Then another quirk of fate happened. It turns out that Longhorn Cattle carried a miniscule tick that transmitted splenic fever. While the Longhorn Cattle were practically immune from the disease, it had a devastating effect on domestic cattle. The tick was only present in the summer months. So some effort was made to move cattle only in the winter. But the need for cattle pressed some drovers to try the summer months with predictable results. In 1866 the Kansas Legislature passed a quarantine statue that permitted cattle drives only in the Indian Territory which then was essentially the western half of the state. The cattle towns of Ellsworth, Dodge City, and Caldwell were soon formed in the open range and they grew in importance when they attracted a rail line. With the arrival of the railroad they were able to receive Texas cattle and then avoid the quarantine line and farmers objections by shipping cattle by rail to Chicago.

The Hannibal Bridge opened in 1869. Now you know where the rails roads were heading. The railroad wasn't coming here because KC was here, because we weren't.

Today's view of the West Bottoms

The West Bottoms has been both blessed and cursed by many unusual events and some rather single minded commercial pursuits. I touched on the effect of trading with Indians for beaver pelts and treaties you haven't heard about that established protectorates and annuities. I suggested we were first anchored here due to the areas proximity to the Indians and river access to mercantile centers in St. Louis. I did not go into detail about the second anchor as the role of the area in outfitting the overland trade and immigration routes is well known. The third anchor, the expansion of the railroad to transmit cattle to the East, seemed worth discussing for few know that the railroad expansion was in part a product of an effort to counter the effects of a tick and the expansion of farming. Add to these anchors the investments in the packing house industry and agribusiness and you have the substance of a major economic engine. Rarely has a community benefited from more dramatic socio-economic conditions.

In retrospect, it does seem like the growth of the West Bottoms has been most aggressive when it was focused on one goal. Community organization is rather simple when most of its members are drawn to the realization of a singular, community wide economic objective. There is no singular economic goal in the area at the present time. As a result, some experience the area as disorganized.

I can tell you the West Bottoms is trying to be flexible as it actively positions itself for the future, even if that future is uncertain. If another major economic force were to emerge you would witness a surge in economic investment that would rival any previous era. However, it would be expecting too much if the next developmental era has to be triggered by conditions equivalent to the discovery of new resources, national expansion, and the emergence of a new transportation system. Maybe for the first time the area will have to adopt multiple economic goals. You can be sure it will reflect business objectives.

Since you have a business here you are involved in this interesting transitional debate. Who is going to facilitate this process? Perhaps you are the one! I can tell you the history of the area is a signpost to the future. Learn the details of its rich history so you can see where you are going. Just don't live in the past, get lost in trite explanations, or believe in fairy tales. You will find that the facts are more exciting and certainly more revealing.

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