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Wyandotte fire had lasting effect

(This is the fourth in a series of "then and now" articles on places of interest in Kansas City, Kan., compiled by area historian Margaret Landis in observance of the 100th birthday of KCK to be celebrated in 1986. Much of the information has appeared in *The Kansan*.)

(Transcriptions are presented without changes except to improve readability.)



Wyandotte High School, circa 1900



Wyandotte High School, circa 1937

Screaming sirens could be heard over the open telephone line from Kansas City, Kan.

That's when a reporter in Topeka really believed the story that Wyandotte High School was on fire. It was March 3, 1934.

It was reported that the alarm sounded at 5:20 p.m. and by 6 p.m. 10 local fire companies and two from Kansas City, Mo., were at the scene, 9th and Minnesota .

Meanwhile students and custodians were moving records from the office. Even after the records were out, "several youths stayed in the office, their eyes red from the dense smoke still throwing out desk drawers filled with papers and supplies," according to an account in *The Kansan*, March 4, 1934.

Chief Olander Lind and a dozen men barely escaped when the concrete floor of the basement hall gave way under them as they searched for the location of the fire.

A complete inventory of loss was impossible, but it was estimated at least \$15,000 worth of school books and paraphernalia owned by the students was lost.

Many of the students finished the final six weeks without textbooks and were given special consideration. The library, containing 6,500 volumes, was destroyed.

About 10,000 people jammed the sidewalks to watch the building, which was built "out in the country" in 1900, die a fiery death.

The cornerstone was removed from the ruins of the old school Oct. 15, 1934. It was stored in the board of education shops.

L.H. Brotherson, superintendent of buildings and grounds at that time; J.F. Wellemeyer, Wyandotte principal and a number of high school and college faculty members witnessed the lowering of the stone to a truck which had been backed up to the wall of the State Avenue side. It was necessary to remove a section of the board fence surrounding the ruins before this could be done.

In 1899, the stone was placed in the original high school structure which was located in the middle of the lot. In 1907, when the north wing was added, the stone was moved to the northeast corner overlooking the intersection of State Avenue and 9th Street.

The copper box taken from the cornerstone was opened Nov. 20, 1934. It contained copies of the *Kansas City Gazette*, *Kansas City Sun*, *Armourdale Press* and *Wyandotte Herald*, local weekly newspapers; the *Kansas City Journal*, *Kansas City Times*, *Kansas City World*, *Kansas City Star* and *Labor Record*, all Kansas City, Mo., newspapers. Other contents were a small Bible, the property of William Kelly, Jr., *Kansas City Star* circulation manager; a copy of the school course of study; the twelfth annual report of the board of education; photographs of the 16 members of the high school faculty; a copy of the resolution by the Mercantile club, which presented the cornerstone to the board of education; a number of professional and business cards, printed programs of the ceremonies; and 14 coins, including one United States 2-cent nickel, and a 1789 English coin, bearing what appeared to be the image of King George III.

The construction of the new Wyandotte High School, 25th and Minnesota, was a two-year process, 1935-37. Plans for building a new high school had originated in 1929 because officials felt they needed a high school more centrally located to house students both in and outside the city limits.

However, soon after plans were delayed because of the Depression and hard economic times. Then when the high school burned in 1934, the community knew it had to pull together and get the construction under way.

An architectural firm from Chicago, Hamilton, Fellows, & Nedved, was hired to design and supervise the building. And a Kansas City, Kan., architect, Joseph W. Radotinsky, also was hired for the job.

The building was a federal emergency administration public works project costing more than \$2.5 million.

The two-year construction produced an elaborate structure full of "free eclectic style" according to Larry Hancks, a principle planner at the city planning division of the economic development and planning department of KCK. He said the overall layout and forms of the building were derived from the work of an American architect named Eliel

Saarinen, who was famous in the 1920s and 30s and whose work "influenced Radotinsky all through his career."

Saarinen's influence on Radotinsky can be seen through thre Romanesque arches and the accent on detail and sculpture.

In short, the tragedy of 1934 turned out to be a large success.