

Winter 2001

Seeking St. Louis, Missouri History Museum

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Publication Info

Published in *South Carolina Historical Magazine*, Volume 23, Issue 1, Winter 2001, pages 124-127.

<http://ucpressjournals.com/journal.asp?j=tph>

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Reflections, 1904–2000: The Story of the People Who Reshaped a City into a Complex Metropolitan Region. BENJAMIN CAWTHRA, historian; SHARON SMITH and WENDI PERRY, curators; BECKI HARTKE, exhibit designer.

“And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time”
—T. S. Eliot

Lots of stuff, mazes of stories, and quotes galore (the one above by St. Louis native T. S. Eliot is used at the beginning of each component of *Seeking St. Louis*)—these were my impressions as I encountered the Missouri History Museum’s mega-exhibition on St. Louis history, *Seeking St. Louis*. Opened to the public in February 2000 for several years, this 18,000-square-foot project took five years to complete, cost \$4 million, and involved many staff along with consultants and input from laymen within the city.

Seeking St. Louis includes three separate exhibitions. Two are chronological. The third, topically arranged to explore St. Louis’s meaning to its citizens, both today and in the past, is the most ambitious of the three. Taken together, the exhibits address St. Louis’s multi-faceted history from prehistoric times to the present. Using nearly 3,000 artifacts, hundreds of images, multitudes of stories, and the latest audiovisual technology, *Seeking St. Louis* shows that the present “Gateway to the West” has complex multi-cultural origins and a rich, often contentious history. And yet for all the hard work that went into telling such a complex, multi-faceted story, the visitor is sometimes baffled by abrupt transitions from one component to the next.

The Missouri History Museum is part of the Missouri Historical Society, one of the nation’s oldest history organizations, with roots going back to 1866. This long history has allowed the society to amass a vast collection, from which the current exhibition benefits. In keeping with President Archibald’s philosophy of the museum as community, the exhibitions try to incorporate many views, but sometimes the message of multi-cultural influence and conflict gets jumbled and detracts from the exhibitions’ impact.¹ For example, the twentieth-century component, *Reflections*, opens with a look at native-son Charles Lindbergh’s first solo flight across the Atlantic and the resulting fame it brought him, but the next component leaps into themes of leisure, recreation, and professional sports. The connection between these two distinct sections was unclear to this reviewer.

What was quite evident, even on first entering the museum, was the large new wing, the Emerson Electric Center, that has been added to the original 1913 building. *Seeking St. Louis* is housed here in three of the Center’s four galleries. *A Place in Time* occupies the first floor, *Cur-*

1. For some insight into Archibald’s museum philosophy, see his “Forum Museums for a New Century,” *Museum News* 77 (November- December, 1998): 33–42.

rents and *Reflections* are located on the second, on each side of the museum's new dining area, The Meriwether's Restaurant. Each gallery encompasses approximately 6,000 square feet.²

Currents begins by highlighting rare early fur trade objects such as trade guns and traps, St. Louis's colonial beginnings under the French and Spanish, and its rise as a center for westward expansion. It then traces the fledgling growth of industry, ending with the 1904 World's Fair. Throughout, *Currents* offers a comprehensive look at the tragedies and triumphs faced by generations of St. Louisians. Many stories are illustrated with the artifacts to tell how individuals prospered or failed. The triumph of entrepreneurial spirit is contrasted with the sharp divisions between pro-slavery and anti-slavery factions that split the city and the state during the Civil War. German immigrant Adam Lemp, a storekeeper who evolved into St. Louis's first beer master in the 1840s, is just one example of individual success. Several key artifacts testify to his organizational and business skill. These include a copper brewing kettle from his brewery and one of his inventions, a single-barrel beer cart. Another fascinating story (without the triumph) is that of Nettie Webber, who operated a truck farm on the outskirts of the city. Visitors learn about her struggles with everything from fluctuating farm prices to droughts and floods, showing how difficult it was to survive in late-nineteenth-century St. Louis. This story is told through an audio program based on her surviving diary of 1895 to 1907. Fewer artifacts accompany this narrative, but this is an exception in an exhibition replete with material culture. These artifacts add significantly to the story of St. Louis's first century and a half, and are often supplemented by audio programs (usually visitor-activated) that include narratives from key figures.

Across from the *Currents* entrance is the beginning of *Reflections*, an examination of St. Louis's twentieth-century history. Starting with memorabilia from the historic 1927 solo flight across the Atlantic of native son Charles Lindbergh, the visitor follows a path through the century. The trail begins with recreation and centers primarily on major league baseball teams, the St. Louis Cardinals and the long-departed St. Louis Browns. An extensive audio-visual program of original footage from the Cardinals' glamour years of the 1960s can be seen, along with a small section of the old stadium's seats. This approach is appropriate, considering how important professional sports have become to modern American society. Just as appropriately, the exhibit next turns to the growth of suburbs in the 1920s.

Visitors learn about relatively new industries, like automobile manufacturing. Objects such as early refrigerators and a "Moon Car Company" vehicle from the 1920s illustrate St. Louis's growth as an industrial and urban center. Yet other important parts of the twentieth-century story seem to get lost. The very brief overview of the Great Depression seems inadequate to this reviewer. Although the stories of World War I and II get more space, they are marginalized at the end of the *Reflec-*

2. The fourth gallery is for special exhibitions. The first will be an extensive show on the Lewis and Clark Expedition, scheduled for opening in fall 2000.

tions gallery. Although the depression and the world wars had an immense impact, the curators and designers chose to relegate them to obscure portions of the exhibition's layout, almost as an afterthought. Instead of starting with the turmoil and fear of World War II (which many scholars see as the catalyst for the Civil Rights movement), the visitor first goes through a comprehensive examination of the Civil Rights era to reach the 1940s. Although there is no question that the latter deserves emphasis, it should not come at the expense of the depression and the two world wars.

Perhaps the most ambitious and yet least successful part of this three-in-one exhibition is in the third gallery, *A Place in Time*. Located on the first floor of the new wing, this component is intended to be the visitor's first stop. Yet it was the most perplexing of the three. Created, according to the institution's web site, "to give the visitor an orientation of the region's rich history," it tries to give visitors a sense of how the community's identity has evolved from prehistoric times to the present. This reviewer found problems from the beginning. The prehistoric era focuses entirely on the renowned mound culture of Cahokia. Although these mound builders were very significant, they were only a small part of a much longer period of human history that the exhibit largely ignored. One wonders what settlements existed before Cahokia? Nonetheless, the artifacts of Cahokia are superbly interpreted through audio programs. Lithic analysis of stone tools and a botanical study of food remains aid the laymen in understanding how archaeology can give meaning to seemingly incomprehensible objects left by Cahokia society.

From prehistory, the visitor is then thrust abruptly into a unit organized around time capsules. Despite the presence of a staff person to help visitors create their own time capsule, this reviewer found little linkage to the section on Cahokia.

Another abrupt transition leads the visitor to a section entitled "Choices and Challenges—Which Choice would you make in response to our common challenges?" Below the main label is a series of revolving panels. Each has a small label with phrases such as "Challenge: How do we find meaning in our lives?" and "Choice: Take me out with the crowd." I tried without much success to decipher what this was supposed to convey. Perhaps it was intended to provide a glimpse of the many ambiguities that every generation faces. However, its very design seemed to trivialize the intent. When watching visitors walk by, few took the trouble to work the revolving panels.

Encircling this "challenges and choices" island were seven vignettes that included *Fun City*, *Freedom City*, *Remembered City*, and *Hub City*. Filled with some fascinating artifacts, such as early bicycles, clothing, modern signage, and sports equipment, these sections seemed to show the meaning of St. Louis for different generations and ethnic groups. Yet *A Place in Time*, except for the Cahokia part, actually repeated aspects of the other two sections more than it illuminated the meanings of the community. A final component of this portion of the exhibition seemed intended as hands-on, but although it was open to the public, it seemed incomplete.

By comparison, other city museums have been dwarfed by Missouri's effort. In 1993, the Atlanta History Center opened *Metropolitan Frontier: Atlanta, 1835–2000*, an impressive urban history exhibit, but much smaller in size. Atlanta's show covers 7,500 square feet and includes 600 artifacts with impressive audiovisual components. Recently updated with new components and audio-visuals, it examines the evolution of Atlanta from a rural-based to an industrial-based economy and the city's growing importance within the regional and global economy. Despite its smaller size, the exhibit still manages to convey the story of a southern community's struggle with multi-cultural issues and problems with industrial growth and entrepreneurial ambitions.³

In conclusion, *Seeking St. Louis* is a massive exhibition that tries to examine all facets and eras of the city's history. It succeeds in showing that individuals from many different ethnic groups with a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds created this large community. In this its artifacts, images, and graphics do an admirable job. Unfortunately, in its effort to tell every facet of St. Louis history, many themes tend to get muddled. Too often the exhibit's organization is confused, and its components do not always work well together. Although a good deal of research and thought went into the show, perhaps it tried to do too much.

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South Carolina State Museum

The Central High Museum and Visitor Center. Little Rock, Arkansas.
LAURA MILLER, director.

Photographic and videotape images of the tense events on the streets surrounding Little Rock's Central High School in the fall of 1957 offer occasional glimpses of a Mobil gas station adjacent to the school. It is that renovated station—one of only two commercial structures from the time of the crisis still standing in the immediate neighborhood—that now houses the Central High Museum and Visitor Center. Despite its constrained size, the museum offers visitors an insightful and concise introduction to the events, issues, and personalities involved in the first high-stakes state/federal showdown in the aftermath of the 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision.

As the outside of the structure has been returned to its condition in the late 1950s, visitors are encouraged to return mentally to that era as they approach the museum's entrance. The original station's lobby, where one enters the building, is now the Center's book and gift shop. Behind the two doors to the service station bays lies the small (900-square-foot) exhibit that is the focus of the museum.

Within the exhibit, which balances text and visual materials quite well, a very brief introduction to the constitutional issues at the center of the battle over school desegregation is followed by a particularly effec-

3. I want to thank Don Rooney of the Atlanta History Center for providing me details about their exhibition.