

## J. C. Nichols and the Shaping of Kansas City

William S. Worley

Columbia: University of Missouri Press

1990

On May 26, 1926, President Calvin Coolidge nominated Nichols to serve on the National Capital Park and Planning Commission. Senator Arthur Capper of Topeka supported the Kansas native's initial appointment with this comment: "Mr. Nichols is one of few men who is a great builder and developer and who at the same time gives full weight to the artistic side of city planning." The Kansas City developer was reappointed by Presidents Hoover and Roosevelt. Nichols was forced to submit his resignation to President Truman in 1948 when his lung cancer required him to curtail many of his outside activities.

### The J. C. Nichols Company: 75 Years

When World War II broke out, Nichols went to Washington and served as a dollar-a-year man overseeing the miscellaneous equipment division.

p. 302

### The J. C. Nichols Chronicle

Always a booster for Kansas City, J.C. Nichols became increasingly uneasy during the 1930s with the economic decline, quite apart from the Depression, that he perceived to be occurring in Kansas City. By 1938, as his uneasiness turned to alarm, he began studying population trends in the central plains states. He checked school enrollment figures over a ten-year period, new telephone connections, new customers for light and power, retail and mail order sales from the area, the number of insurance policies being written, and the size of grain crops produced and livestock shipped, among other data.

He discovered the frightening fact that the great middle part of the United States was losing population rapidly. Further, it was not older people who were moving, but the young people who were leaving home in large numbers to seek economic opportunity elsewhere. If this trend were allowed to continue, the result would be ghost towns, Nichols repeatedly declared.

The root of the problem was that the agricultural area, historically the chief source of Kansas City's prosperity, had suffered a decade of depressed farm prices and a catastrophic drought that turned it into the infamous "dust bowl". And as money dried up and population declined, it became a less attractive market center for industry. During the decade of the 1930s, the city suffered a much more severe decline in manufacturing jobs than the national figure of 6 percent. The value of goods produced went down 35 percent compared to 11 percent nationally. The city ranked third in the United States in "unused labor supply," that is, in unemployed workers. Kansas City was too dependent on agriculture and without significant industry. But how was the problem to be solved?

Typically, J. C. Nichols took the positive, optimistic tack. He waxed eloquent about the boundless natural resources and raw materials in the central states: minerals, timber, gas, soil, coal, water. He was in the forefront of pointing out the abundance of agricultural by-products, formerly just farm waste, that could be processed into cellulose plastics, synthetic fabrics and other new materials.

He pointed out the geographical advantage of central location and the immense pool of labor, the farm boys and girls who were trained from youth to "fix it."

He began his efforts at home, working with the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce, the boards of directors of banks, and business and industrial executives. As Kansas was particularly hard hit by the farm depression, Nichols took the lead in getting a Kansas Industrial Association organized, with the aim of stimulating and assisting existing industry and attracting new companies. Foreseeing that aviation would be a frontier for new industry in the country and realizing that the wide open spaces of the central states were ideal for aviation purposes, Nichols pressed this idea hard with Kansas City bankers and with the leaders of towns in Kansas. To his frustration, he too often found them apathetic about industry.

...in the United States, President Roosevelt, seeing that war was inevitable, and over opposition from appeasers and "America Firsters," had begun a massive defense effort that included extending aid to Great Britain. A National Defense Advisory Commission (NDAC) was set up, with members appointed by the president. Edward Stettinius, on leave from the presidency of U.S. Steel, was put in charge of the production of raw materials necessary for national defense. Manufacturing the raw materials into finished products was the responsibility of William J. Knudsen, on leave as head of General Motors. By 1939, J.C. Nichols was no stranger to Washington, D.C. He was in his thirteenth year of a member of the key National Capital Planning Commission and was serving on the Advisory Council of the Department of Commerce. The federal establishment had expanded enormously during the New Deal with an "alphabet soup" of new agencies, and was beginning to swell even more in response to the defense effort; new federal workers were arriving in the capital at the rate of 3,500 per month.

Nichols was also serving on the space control committee of the Department of the Budget to allocate new office space, as a consultant to the Public Buildings Administration, on a committee to overhaul Washington's overloaded public transportation system, and on a decentralization committee to relocate agencies where possible to other cities with more office space and more adequate facilities (one result was the move of the Farm Credit Administration to Kansas City). Nichols was known to FDR.

From his Washington perspective, J. C. saw that the defense effort would lead to industrial expansion on an unimaginably massive scale, one that would set the pattern for decades to come. But in the infancy of this expansion, the entire middle belt of the United States was being ignored. As most existing manufacturing plants were either in the industrial East or the far West, it was easier and faster to give them the defense contracts. Large companies were reluctant to build new plants in an unknown area that, in the words of one eastern newspaper, was "only fitted to raise hogs, wheat and corn." The urgency of the situation was not lost on a number of business and industrial leaders in the central states who realized that without large defense production, the area might forever by an "industrial wasteland." One powerful ally to them and to Nichols was Roy Roberts, the editor of the Kansas City Star. J.C. and Roy teamed up to convince the federal government that the central states were the ideal location for war-effort manufacturing.

Their great opportunity to make headway in this effort came unexpectedly in early 1940 with an invitation to J.C. to come to Washington and head up a major division of the NDAC. In early 1940, J.C. was in Washington, DC trying to get some defense production for Kansas. One day he was approached by an aviation executive who had been helping China in its war against Japan

and had recently returned home. He told JC that, having had to move air bases every few days or weeks to avoid Japanese bombing, he was alarmed to see virtually the entire aircraft construction industry in America concentrated on the West Coast within range of naval guns and aerial bombs. Having hurried to Washington to warn defense production authorities of the danger he perceived and to persuade them to disperse aircraft production, he had met a blank wall.

JC, together with Roy Roberts, was able to get an appointment with William Knudsen, head of manufacturing for the nation's defense production. After the China veteran expressed his alarm, the Kansas City men presented their case for locating defense industry in the central states. Knudsen agreed with the wisdom of the proposal.

Knudsen invited JC to head up the NDAC Miscellaneous Equipment Division. Do that from 9 to 5 and then work on getting more defense plants in the middle of the country.

Nichols salary was a dollar-a year.

Company memo – "I am going to Washington, first to fight for the preservation of our country,, and second, to try to get some recognition of the central states."

While awaiting his official appointment by FDR, Nichols stepped up his efforts to mobilize the leaders of Kansas City and the rest of the area to present the case for locating industry there—an effort that had been gathering momentum. Under the leadership of Kansas City mayor John B. Gage and the mayors of other towns in Kansas and western Missouri, a Mid-Central War Resource Board was formed with Lou Holland, head of a Kansas City engraving company as chairman. The Mid-Central Board collected data from some 15,000 are industries, large and small, and sent it to Nichols in Washington.

Didn't know how to bid on government contracts – afraid of red tape involved and other regulations – ran "schools and clinics on how to bid on contracts. Kansas Industrial Commission, the Mid-Central War Resources Board, and various Chambers of Commerce.

9 state conference of industrial leaders and other representatives from 200 communities = Midwest Defense Council. Richard W. Robbins, former TWA pres. Elected chairman of council became effective lobbying force for changes in defense industry policy to benefit the central states. For example FOB Philadelphia rules, permits to split orders so small Midwest plants could bid on part of an order.

"Kansas City Plan" – decentralization of defense production, so that, rather than relying on a few large plants, small plants throughout the nation could do whatever they were best equipped to do.

1. Lessen risk of destruction of production capacity in event of enemy attack
2. Reduce dislocation of industry and redistribution of labor
3. Ease demobilization of industry and labor after the war

After US entered war, the "Kansas City Plan" became government policy.

"As soon as I arrived I was astounded to find that the proposed program of new defense plants included no... plants or air bases between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains, except in the extreme south. (At that time there were more than 500 men leaving Kansas City each week for defense plants on the east and west coasts. ) I immediately contact the top officials in Washington, including President

Roosevelt; Secretary of Navy Frank Knox; Secretary of War Stimson; Admiral Towers, head of the navy Air Corps; and many others – not once, but many times...I rallied support from industrialists, business officials and head of chambers of commerce throughout the Middle West, getting large delegations to come from the central states.

We finally changed the whole thinking in Washington and brought about the establishment of a reasonable number of defense plants through the Middle West."

Nichols received credit for the Remington Arms plant and for the \$87 million bomber plant in Fairfax on the Kansas side, employing some 26,000 persons and bringing subcontracts to local machine shops and sheet metal works. He also had a part in locating Sunflower Ordnance Plant at De Soto, Kansas, the largest defense plant in the central states, authorized at \$100 million. By the end of 1941, there were more defense plants between Mississippi and the Rockies, and that "probably more than any other one man, J.C. Nichols was responsible for the location of most of them." (Tulsa Tribune) Lincoln Evening State Journal – "Few men have done more in pleading the cause of the Central United States as a region of great industrial potentiality...than J.C. Nichols of Kansas City." Senator Capper characterized Nichols as "easily the first and most important citizen of the Great Midwest".

By the end of the war, no less than 100 plants and military installations were located in the Midwest as a result of the decentralization program. The Kansas City area (including Jackson and Clay counties, Missouri, and Wyandotte and Johnson Counties, Kansas was tuning out Mitchell bombers, ammunition, rocket powder, aircraft engines, landing craft, most of the ground equipment of the Army air communication service, and much other defense equipment. Some 332,000 workers were employed in these defense plants. One cent out of every dollar spent on war production was being spent in the Kansas City area. Many of the plants remained in the peacetime that followed, converted to nonmilitary use and providing an industrial base to balance the region's dependence on agriculture.

The J. C. Nichols Chronicle by Robert Pearson and Brad Pearson 1994 County Club Plaza Press distributed by the University Press of Kansas.