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Article Title: Who's In Charge? A Framework for Examining Community Leadership in Omaha over the Past Century

Full Citation: Garneth O Peterson, "Who's in Charge? A Framework for Examining Community Leadership in Omaha over the Past Century," *Nebraska History* 72 (1991): 99-110.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NHOMahaLeadership.pdf>

Date: 4/30/2014

Article Summary: This article examines who Omaha's leaders have been and what roles they played in the community. Divided into four periods, there are the Ground Floor Men, the Organization Men and the Political Machine, the Interregnum [the "interval"], and the Rise of the Corporate Leaders.

Cataloging Information:

Names: A J Hanscom, A J Poppleton, Byron Reed, John I Redick, Herman Kountze, Edward Creighton, John Creighton, William A Paxton, Gurdon W Wattles, Edward Rosewater, Ezra Millard, Joseph Millard, Frank B Johnson, Tom Dennison, Roy Towl, Dan Butler, Henry Doorly, Charles W Leeman, A V Sorensen, Paul Williams, Michael Boyle

Keywords: Omaha National Bank; First National Bank; Creighton University; Union Pacific Railroad; Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition of 1898; Grain Exchange; Omaha's National Corn Expositions [1908 and 1910]; Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway; Omaha Business Men's Association; Ninth Street Warehouse Canyon; Martin Bomber Plant; Offutt Field; *Life* magazine; Midwest Electric Supply; Central Park Mall; Northwestern Bell; ConAgra; Enron [Internorth]; McManis and Associates

Photographs / Images: Central Park Mall [courtesy of Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce]; Andrew J Poppleton; John A Creighton; J A Millard; William A Paxton; Union Pacific headquarters, Omaha, from *Daily Graphic* April 8, 1881; Omaha stockyards area; Mayor Dan Butler from Bostwick-Frohardt Collection, owned by KMTV; Henry Doorly and A V Sorensen [courtesy of *Omaha World Herald*]; Omaha Douglas County Civic Center [courtesy of Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce]

WHO'S IN CHARGE? A FRAMEWORK FOR EXAMINING COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP IN OMAHA OVER THE PAST CENTURY

By Garneth O. Peterson

Garneth Peterson, now a resident of St. Paul, Minnesota, has been an Omaha city planner and has also written and taught Omaha history. She is a past president of the Historical Society of Douglas County.

Studies of community leadership have been a mainstay of publications in history, political science, and urban studies scholarship for decades. From quantitative analyses of elected

officials to biographies of mayors to questions of what leadership is and which groups held it, research has been carried out to identify the various facets of the rather intangible quality of "leadership."

Scholars and journalists have explored the question of leadership in Omaha through all of these types of studies, although not all authors focused explicitly on that question. By

relating in some way to the questions of leadership in Omaha, these studies reported the various types of men who led Omaha over a century. This article attempts to examine who Omaha's leaders have been and what roles they played in the community. It aims to provide a preliminary framework for examining community leadership in the city, as a way of organizing our thoughts about Omaha's growth and

Central Park Mall. Courtesy of Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce.



development throughout its history.

In recognizing the elusive nature of "leadership," this study does not attempt to enforce a definition of the word. Leadership could be identified through sources such as local election statistics, chamber of commerce board lists, or a whole collection of other quantitative indicators. This paper, however, relies on the subjective rule of who has the power to "get things done." Although on some occasions elected officials have approached that level of control, more often than not that power in Omaha has resided with the business and corporate magnates.

The four categories of leaders suggested below also parallel developmental periods of Omaha's growth, and are perhaps more reflective of the times which shaped the context in which they led than examples of leadership types. The city's leaders changed as the city grew from its frontier roots to a transportation and manufacturing economy. They changed again as Omaha evolved into the post-World War II financial and service center that has completely altered the city's image of itself in the last quarter century.

The Ground Floor Men — Nineteenth century expansion and the development of new towns in the West provided a fertile field for enterprising men who looked for opportunities to grow and prosper. These were the men who came to the frontier to speculate in land development or to provide the commodities the new cities needed to grow and expand. In Omaha, they arrived soon after Nebraska Territory was opened in 1854 or in the big growth year of 1856. These men "got in on the ground floor," made their investments and fought to insure that their new settlement and financial security would flourish.¹

Most of Omaha's ground floor men were of Yankee stock and came to the city with some education and training. Early arrivals such as A. J. Hanscom and A. J. Poppleton were trained as attorneys and exercised some initial



Andrew J. Poppleton. (NSHS-P853)

control in establishing the territorial capital in Omaha. Pioneer realtor Byron Reed made his wealth in real estate speculation, as did attorney John I. Redick and numerous other early businessmen who purchased property soon after arrival and simply waited for the city to expand and envelop their holdings.²

Despite the contributions made by these early activists whose names have survived in street, park, and town names, there was another group of early arrivals who operated on a grander scale. These leaders included families such as the Kountzes, Millards, and the Creightons, who had personal wealth or business connections that gave them power beyond local politics. Ezra and Joseph Millard organized the bank that became Omaha National Bank. The four Kountze brothers, who had made a fortune carrying freight for the federal government, established the bank that

became First National. Herman Kountze purchased land throughout the city as well and probably had more subdivisions named for him than did any other man in the city's history.³

Edward and John Creighton came to Omaha in 1856. Edward built the first telegraph line to the West coast by 1862, while John Creighton was an early freighter, hauling supplies to Montana miners and Union Pacific Railroad construction crews. The Creightons made their fortunes on transportation and communication in the opening West, but funneled most of their wealth back into Omaha through their business activities and into Creighton University, churches, and hospitals in the city. Edward Creighton died young in 1874, but John lived into the twentieth century. As a benevolent presence in Omaha, John oversaw the family business interests and investments and helped fund such major enterprises as the Union Stockyards Company.⁴

Although a contemporary of the Kountzes and Creightons, William A. Paxton was a leader of a different sort in early Omaha. A wild and rough frontier type, he started as a freighter hauling supplies to the miners in Colorado. Paxton secured a Union Pacific Railroad grading contract, and invested the considerable earnings in the commodity that became the basis of his fortune — cattle. Anticipating the growth of the cattle and meatpacking industry, Paxton became the first president of the Union Stockyards Company, which built South Omaha into a meatpacking center.⁵

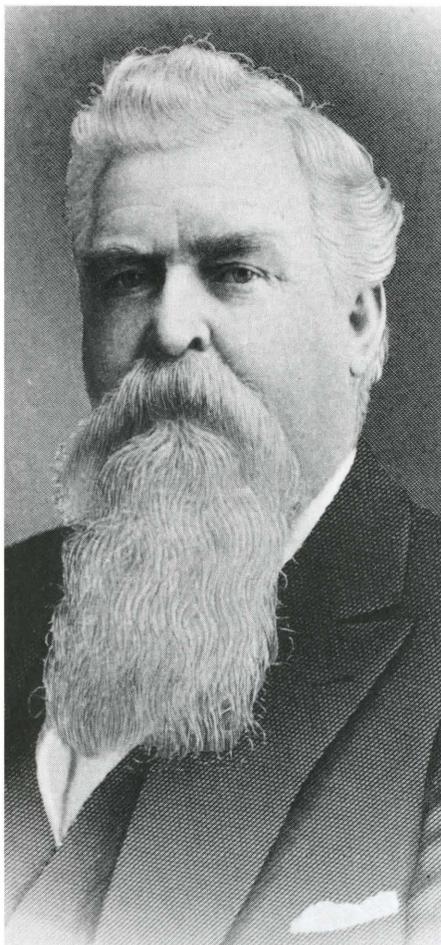
The "ground floor men" provided Omaha's early leadership, investing in business enterprises and carving a city from a speculative town site. Some, like the Creightons, made their fortunes from the transportation and communication networks of the West, while others, like the Kountzes and Millards, developed their wealth from the growth of Omaha as a center serving this new hinterland. Of all of the community leaders, Paxton was most the rugged

individualist who followed the typical pioneer or Horatio Alger mold of "making good" on the frontier.⁶

One other side of Omaha in its early years should also be addressed. Much of Omaha's early growth was tied to the Union Pacific Railroad, which provided a basis for the city's later development as a wholesaling and processing center and was a central factor for the creation of the Union Stockyards. Except for Paxton, this same group of early leaders had fought to secure not only the railroad but the railroad bridge as well. Omaha's leaders played a subservient role to the Eastern capitalists, but as long as the railroad (and later the stockyards) were successful, Omaha's leaders would be successful. As a critical analyst later stated, "Without the U.P. the speculators of Omaha were nothing; with it the world was their oyster." Despite the investments, risks, and efforts made by the "ground floor men," their city, like most frontier towns, had the misfortune to be "the headquarters for the lieutenants of a distant industry."⁷

The Organization Men and the Political Machine — By the 1890s Omaha had changed dramatically. The 1880s witnessed the transformation from dirt streets and wood-frame construction to paved streets, a skyscraper, and massive population growth and physical expansion. As the city became more mature, its leaders and their leadership styles changed. The 1890s and the turn of the century made way for a new, twentieth century leader who reflected the increasing organization of American life. These new leaders recognized by the community were men who assumed civic responsibility with a sense of "noblesse oblige" — who offered their superior leadership skills to boost their personal images along with that of their community.

Omaha's quintessential organization man in this era was Gurdon W. Wattles. A successful Iowa banker, Wattles came to the city in 1892 looking for financial and social opportunities.



John A. Creighton. (NSHS-P853)

With the intent of rising in community affairs and business, Wattles soon joined every organization in town and jumped at every leadership opportunity. As the old leaders were starting to retire from the scene, Wattles represented the "twentieth century go-getter."⁸

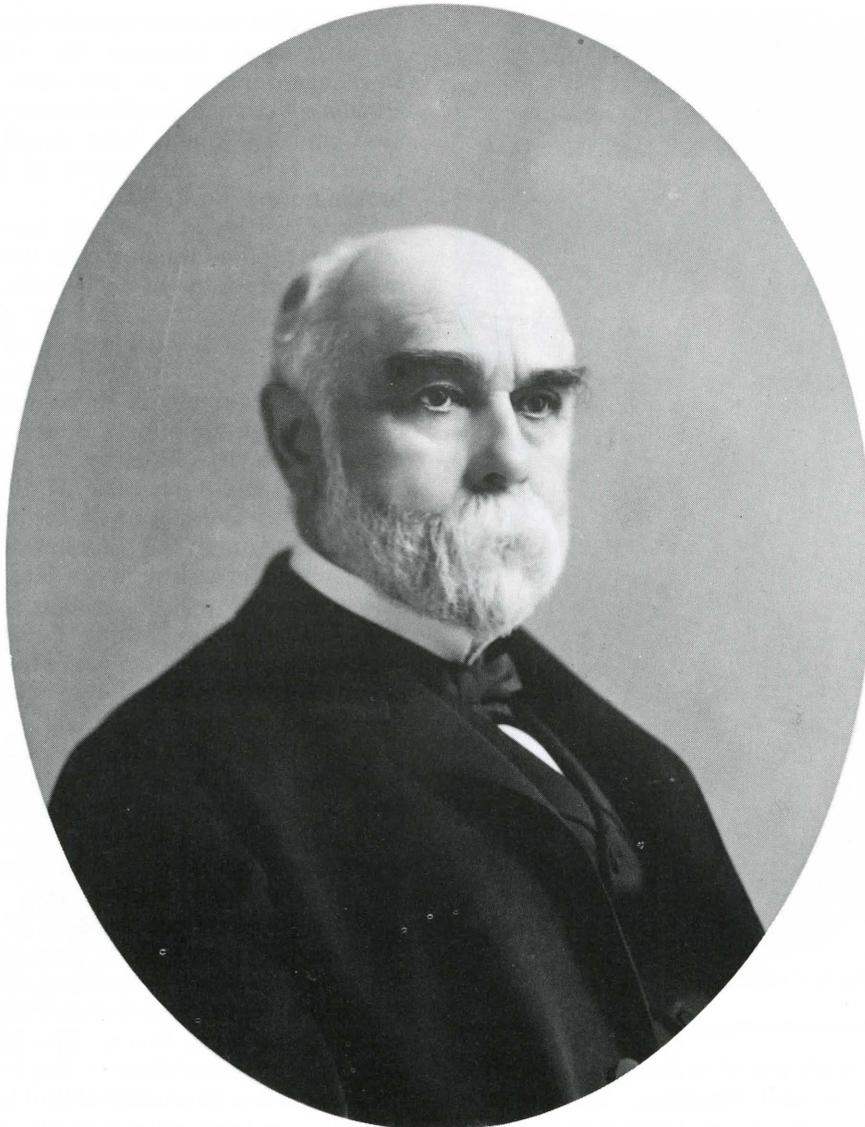
Wattles quickly found himself in charge of Omaha's grand Trans-Mississippi and International Exposition of 1898. Befitting his "go-getter" image, Wattles later claimed the exposition lifted "the businessmen out of the slough of despond by giving them new hope and vision and courage." Wattles was a banker by trade, as an official of what became U.S. National

Bank. But his civic interests continued as he helped organize the Grain Exchange, served as president of Omaha's National Corn Expositions in 1908 and 1910, and later acted as Federal Food Administrator of Nebraska during World War I.⁹

While Wattles's community booster activities typified the new civic leader, his role as president of the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railway provided another somewhat less appealing aspect of leaders of his day. As president of the company in 1909, Wattles acted to crush the efforts of streetcar workers who went on strike for union recognition and a pay raise. Wattles's intransigence in dealing with the union won out, and organized labor in Omaha was set back for another three decades. Key in the battle against Omaha unions was the Omaha Business Men's Association, a secretive organization founded in 1903 with the intent of keeping Omaha an open-shop city.¹⁰

A recent study of the Business Men's Association (BMA) has shown that the bulk of members came from the jobbing, wholesaling, and retailing trades, most of which were local firms tied to the Omaha metropolitan area. An analysis of twenty-six members of the Omaha BMA inner circle showed at least ten who were wholesalers located in the developing Warehouse Canyon along South Ninth Street. The BMA had a strong connection to the Commercial Club (a forerunner of the chamber of commerce), often with the same men serving on the executive committees of both boards. With its local focus, the BMA conspicuously lacked representatives from Omaha's big businesses such as the railroads and meatpacking industries.¹¹

The Business Men's Association and Commercial Club represented one side of community leaders in Omaha. These men comprised the Progressive Era reformers in the city, who pursued and achieved such "good government" efforts as the passage of a progressive annexation law, creation of the commission form of government, and



J.A. Millard. (NSHS-P853)

various election reform measures in the state legislature.¹² Despite all their efforts at civic responsibility, the BMA and Commercial Club members were a lower echelon of community control. Without control of the most powerful aspects of Omaha's economy, they had to reckon with the fact that many of the significant business decisions that could affect the future of their city would be made by men in far-off Eastern boardrooms.

In sharp contrast to the official community leaders in this era was a less prominent, but much more powerful political machine. The machine wielded more power to "get things done" than any community leader, although the goals and desired achievements of the two groups were probably never the same. The political machine of city boss Tom Dennison cared little for community image, but as long as it retained power and

profited from its businesses without interference, the official leaders could do whatever they liked.¹³

Created in the late 1890s under the tutelage of *Omaha Bee* editor Edward Rosewater, the machine controlled Omaha's political life from the 1900s until 1933. From a power base in the First, and later the Third Ward, Tom Dennison was able to manufacture the votes necessary to keep his candidates in office. Control of city hall enabled Dennison to deliver Omaha's leading businessmen favors such as contracts or assistance in circumventing city codes or regulations. In the meantime, the machine made huge profits from the underworld economy of gambling, saloons, and vice.¹⁴

Dennison found lieutenants of various racial and ethnic groups to connect him to his constituency in each neighborhood. The Boss's contact to the upper classes and such men as the Business Men's Association was Omaha Printing Company President Frank B. Johnson. Johnson became known as Omaha's "business boss" and had a direct telephone line to Dennison. He kept his role as secret as possible, preferring to remain in the background as a silent partner. Johnson had come from a pioneer family and married Byron Reed's daughter, thus insuring his social position. He made a successful living operating the Omaha Printing Company and thus was a leading businessman in the community.¹⁵

The eventual collapse of the machine occurred in 1933, after an aging Tom Dennison stood trial for conspiracy to violate the prohibition act. Although he was not convicted, Dennison left Omaha for good, leaving a vacuum of political leadership in elected offices or wielded by a machine. Some locals indicated interest in picking up the remains of the Dennison organization, but no one seemed able to sustain it.¹⁶

The Depression of the 1930s and its economic blows created a watershed for Omaha's leadership. The men who

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could have stepped in and led with a sense of responsibility — men like Gurdon Wattles or other BMA/Commercial Club types — had no desire to be involved in political affairs. Few men with wealth and community standing enjoyed the “power and pleasure” of being a business boss as Frank Johnson did.¹⁷ The fall of the Dennison machine not only ended an era but left a void that took three decades to begin to fill.

The Interregnum — Of all the eras in Omaha’s history and its leadership, perhaps the least has been written about the period from the 1930s to the creation of the new city charter in 1956.

It was clearly the end of Omaha’s “Golden Era” with its Gurdon Wattles and BMA leadership, as the Depression brought the resurgence of union growth in the city.¹⁸ Just when a new generation of leaders, the grandsons of the ground floor men and sons of the Progressive organization men, should have stepped in to guide Omaha’s future, none appeared.

The Depression and the federal dollars it sent to Omaha were not even enough to give rise to a new political machine. There was no city boss to control WPA money, and city officials were decidedly lackluster. Roy Towl, mayor from 1933 to 1936, had played his greatest leadership role for Omaha in

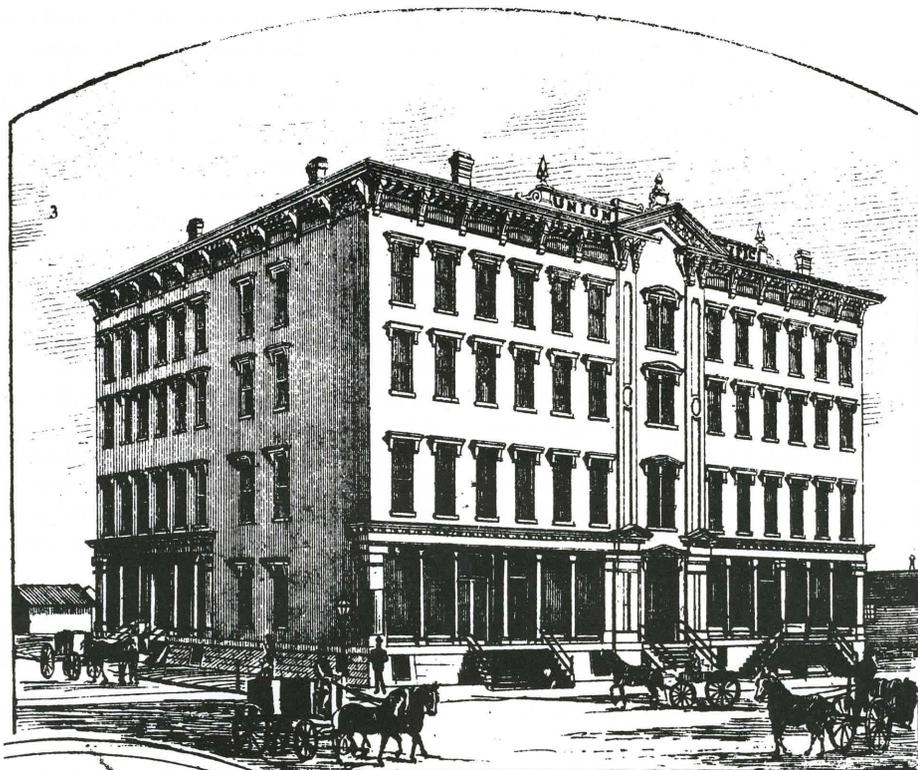
his earlier clandestine efforts to rid the city of Tom Dennison. His courageous, singular effort was significant in the downfall of the machine, but a role that most Omahans may not have ever known because his later career was so mediocre.¹⁹ Dan Butler, who held office as city clerk and as a city commissioner since 1906 with only one break, served as mayor from 1936 to 1945. Although knowledgeable about city government, Butler received the most press for stunts such as his successful effort to fry an egg on the searing sidewalk outside city hall in the record-setting summer of 1936. He gathered additional attention for his censorship efforts to ban “filthy plays” such as *Tobacco Road* and dancer Sally Rand from Omaha.²⁰

The national events of the Depression and war probably provided a major reason why the sons and grandsons of earlier leaders failed to take charge. The Depression, in particular, caused Omaha and its leadership to draw inward at a time when it most needed to look aggressively to the future. The lack of national economic security and a local political vacuum left Omaha floundering when it could have built for the future.

As Omaha drew inward, it developed some of the conservatism that has continued to affect its growth and its leaders into the 1980s. Perhaps Omaha’s geographic location, far enough away from major metropolitan areas, allowed it to ignore national trends or economic development efforts that might have helped the city prepare for its future. While conceding that this conclusion is speculative, it is possible that Omaha’s location — far enough away from Kansas City, Denver, and Minneapolis-St. Paul — allowed it to focus inward whenever the city faced unsteady economic transitions.²¹ By the 1930s, it was clear that Omaha’s old economy, built on the railroads and agricultural hinterland, could no longer provide a total economic backbone. The outside investors who had helped

William A. Paxton. (NSHS-P853)





Union Pacific headquarters, Omaha. From Daily Graphic (New York), April 8, 1881. (NSHS-054-443)

fuel these entities pulled back with the Depression. In the end, maybe it was not that Omaha's leaders failed to provide any leadership; it was that they had no concept of how to lead in the changing economy and no indication of where to go.

The Omaha area profited from World War II, thanks primarily to the efforts of Nebraska senators to secure the Martin Bomber Plant in Bellevue and the later location of the Strategic Air Command at Offutt Field.²² Omaha's businessmen tried to prime the post-war economic pump and unveiled a grand new plan to spruce up the city. The July 7, 1947, issue of *Life* magazine announced "An American City's Dream" and provided a twelve-page picture section discussing Omaha's "blueprint for progress."

The major civic effort had started when *Omaha World-Herald* publisher Henry Doorly had "totted up Omaha's

merits and defects." He found that Omaha had "lost the early gusto" and that "conservative financing had run many city institutions into miserable condition." Doorly used his influence to draw together citizens' committees who produced the "Blue Book," a major capital improvements plan. Voters approved the bond issues to support the projects, as well as five citizens' commissions to supervise the huge undertaking.²³

The Blue Book plan was noteworthy as the first surfacing of the post-war businessmen's efforts to again involve themselves in city affairs. Like the Progressive reformers in the 1900s, these men sought to take charge of one of the most standard of government responsibilities: capital improvements programming. Even more telling was the fact that all the bonded indebtedness was presided over by citizens' commissions, which were comprised of

local businessmen, not government officials.²⁴

As if to reinforce the voters' choice of citizen control, the *Life* article included pictures of each of the citizen commissions, made up of stern-faced men poring over blueprints. The mayor, Charles W. Leeman, was also pictured: The caption called him "friendly, a lover of cigars and neckties. He has 1500 ties valued at \$7500, changes his neckware twice daily." With Mayor Leeman in charge of his neckware and little else, the businessmen had free rein to steer the rudderless machine of city government.²⁵

The preliminary efforts at post-war leadership exhibited in the 1947 Blue Book plan made it clear that city government was a shambles. Many blamed the commission form of government, adopted in 1912 as a more businesslike, progressive approach to governing and a potential, although unsuccessful, way to eliminate machine control of the city council. But by the 1950s, it was obvious that the commission diluted control and left a weak mayor unable to develop any consistent direction for the city.²⁶ It was the effort to develop a new city charter and new form of municipal government in the 1950s that coincided with the rise of the corporate leader in Omaha. Such men reflected the new white collar economy that would increasingly turn Omaha away from its nineteenth century blue collar roots.

The Rise of the Corporate Leader — A. V. Sorensen was a successful businessman in Omaha when he took on his first major public affairs assignment as chairman of the municipal charter convention in the hot summer of 1956. Sorensen had previously built and operated his successful company, Midwest Electric Supply, and been active in civic affairs as president of the Chamber of Commerce in 1955. As chairman of the charter convention, Sorensen presided over a four-month effort to replace Omaha's old commission form of government with a new

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strong mayor and council members elected at large. Sorensen then won election to the first city council under the new charter and was president of that body from 1957 to 1961. He determined to stay out of politics after 1961, but "a lurid stretch of corruption, incompetence and plain goofiness in city government" led Sorensen to run for and win election as mayor in 1965.²⁷

Sorensen's term in office was not an easy period in Omaha's history, including both civil disturbances in North Omaha and the closing of the major packing houses in South Omaha. But Sorensen looked to the future. He grasped, better than others, that Omaha's economy had changed, and that it was time for new views, new

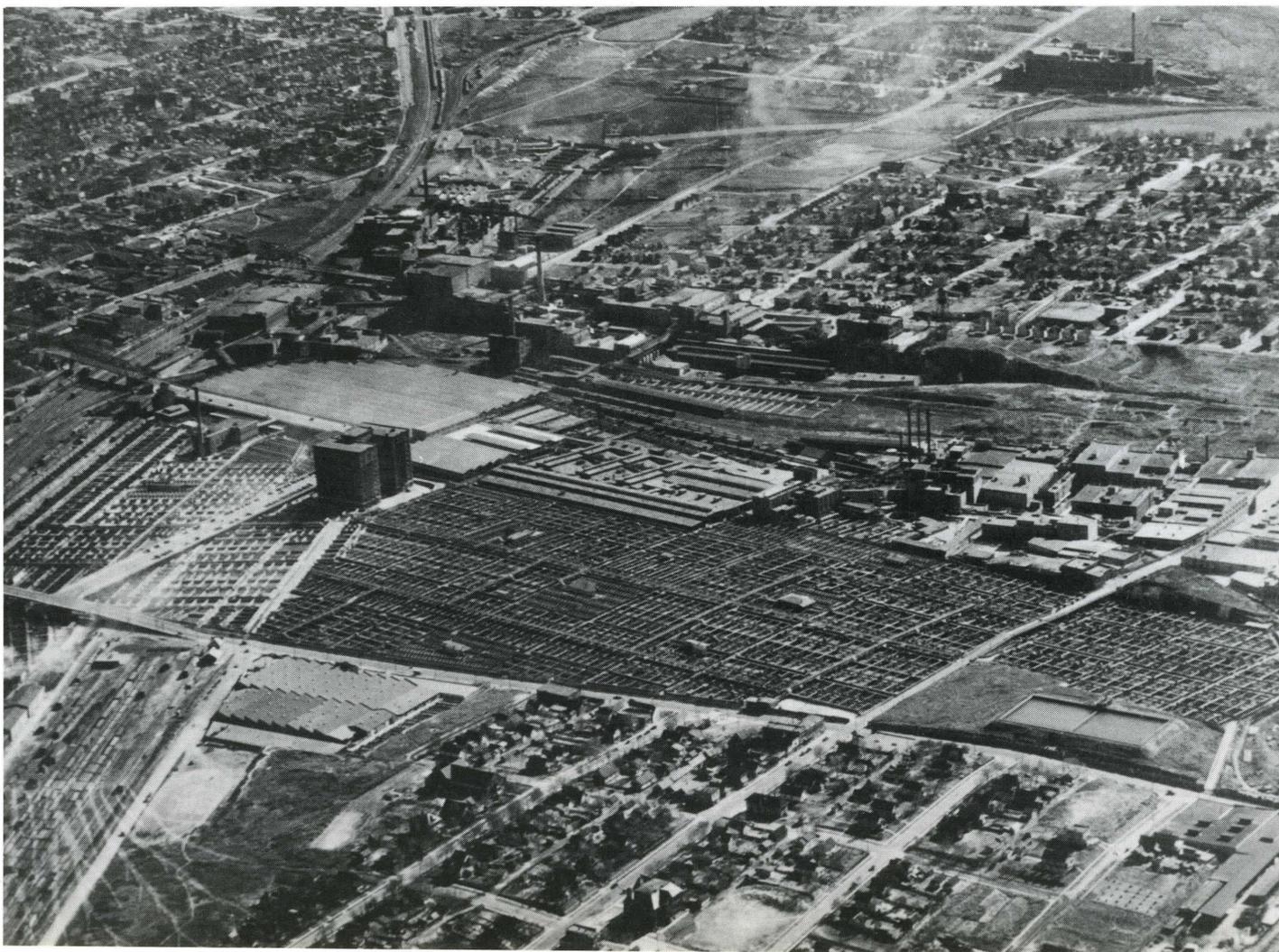
ideas and most of all, a new face on a city that looked increasingly dumpy. He tore down the Richardsonian Romanesque city hall, a multi-towered monument to the leaders of the Golden Era. In its place he pushed for a new Omaha-Douglas County Civic Center, which efficiently connected to the Douglas County Courthouse and put local government offices in one complex.²⁸

As a small businessman, A. V. Sorensen had not come from Omaha's corporate level of leaders. In his mark upon the city of Omaha, however, he came closer to real leadership than many who fit that corporate mold. Sorensen was so successful because he was able to bridge the gap between municipal government and the busi-

ness community to achieve significant ends in Omaha.

Despite Sorensen's leadership role as mayor, he failed to be included in the city's top leadership lists. In 1966, the *Sun* newspapers analyzed Omaha's power structure, identifying "20 Influentials" based on their occupations and positions on various powerful local corporate and non-profit boards. The article, written by Paul Williams, noted the omission of Mayor Sorensen and that the mayor had, on occasion, had some trouble with the business community. The *Sun* concluded that a part of the problem was "simple resistance to change that afflicts many senior leadership people." The article also stated that the really powerful men had "largely withdrawn into a circular

Omaha stockyards area. Photo by Nathaniel Dewell. (NSHS-054-1066)





Omaha Mayor Dan Butler. From Bostwick-Frohardt Collection, owned by KMTV and on permanent loan to Western Heritage Museum, Omaha.

world in which they serve on each other's boards, and raise funds for each other's cultural and welfare projects."²⁹

The "20 Influentials" were primarily chairmen or presidents of the city's biggest companies, including Peter Kiewit Sons, Mutual of Omaha, Northern Natural Gas, Northwestern Bell, Union Pacific Railroad, and several banks. Most had been in "top command" positions for as long as thirty years. Many had been involved in community affairs since the 1947 Blue Book plan, and active in supporting the 1959 Omaha Plan, a major capital improvements bond issue which had been overwhelmingly defeated. Williams felt the defeat of the 1959 Plan, as well as the 1956 charter convention, had started to divide Omaha into two voting groups: a moderate and low income group who consistently voted against the "silk-stocking crowd."³⁰

By 1981, when the *Sun* newspapers again looked at Omaha's power structure, only two of the same individuals remained on the list. Increasingly, these "20 Influentials" were not Omaha-born and bred, a factor which frustrated and angered some Omahans. But the leaders were still essentially the same types: men who could marshal significant resources and ran the major companies in the city.³¹

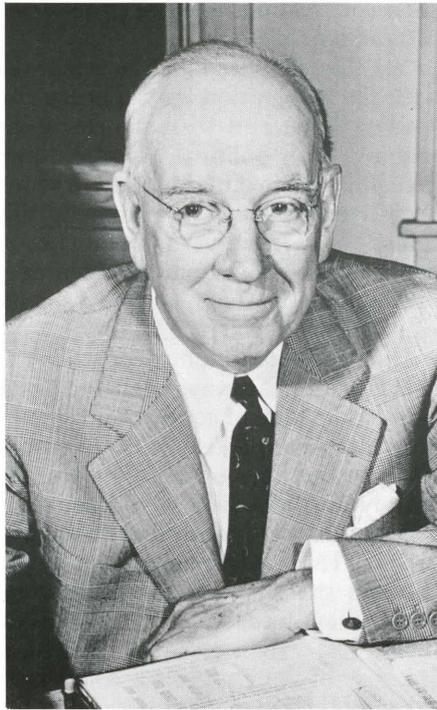
By the end of the 1980s, business leaders could point to a substantially new Omaha downtown built with both public and private money. Downtown had a new Central Park Mall, with a new Northwestern Bell and its computer facility on opposite sides of the mall. Numerous older office buildings and warehouses had been renovated for housing and Sixteenth Street had finally become a smaller and much-maligned version of Minneapolis's Nicollet Mall. But the most massive change of the late 1980s was the demolition of the entire Ninth Street Warehouse Canyon for a new "campus-like" headquarters for ConAgra, a

rapidly growing food processing firm.

Because the ConAgra headquarters project is so recent, it is difficult to put into historical perspective. It is, however, an important illustration of both the power and financial capabilities of Omaha's business community in a leadership role. This leadership role must be viewed in the context of the political turmoil in municipal government over the past decade.

In 1981, Michael Boyle, a young Democratic attorney who had previously been Douglas County election commissioner, was elected mayor. Boyle established a strong cabinet and instituted efficient capital improvements programming, resumed annexation, and supported adoption of a new zoning ordinance. Although Boyle's first term was promising, he was recalled in January 1987. Unfortunately for Omaha, the recall election set in motion a critical series of events that left Omaha city government adrift, as Boyle was followed by two mayors within two years.³²

While the political issue unfolded, the city's economy was reeling. Enron, formerly known as Internorth and Northern Natural Gas, had acquired a much smaller Houston Natural Gas Company. In summer 1986, it was clear that Houston Natural Gas had gotten the best deal — the company was being moved to Houston. When ConAgra later indicated plans to move its headquarters out of state, the city's political and business leaders scrambled to retain the company and prevent another exodus. Although ConAgra looked at several suburban locations for its "campus-like" headquarters design plan, the Omaha Development Council and Chamber of Commerce succeeded in convincing ConAgra to locate on the riverfront site of the Ninth Street Warehouse Canyon. The Warehouse Canyon, approximately two blocks of turn-of-the-century massive warehouses, had been listed as a National Register Historic District in 1986, and still played a vital role in



Henry Doorly. Courtesy of Omaha World-Herald.



A.V. Sorensen. Courtesy of Omaha World-Herald.

wholesaling and warehousing business. The area had been built between 1900 and 1915 for the city's wholesaling businesses, many of which were presided over by the earlier generation of leaders who made up the Business Men's Association. The Omaha Development Council played a major role in convincing ConAgra to move to the riverfront, and assisted with funds to insure that the project worked.³³ By 1990, the Warehouse Canyon had been razed and initial buildings of ConAgra's new campus had been constructed.

The development of the ConAgra headquarters is a recent but important illustration of the role of the business leadership in the process of "getting things done" in Omaha. This role has been especially prominent when city government was in transition or floundered, whether it was in the Depression and war years or the late 1980s.

Conclusion — In fall 1985 the city of Omaha and chamber of commerce hired McManis and Associates, a national consultant, to assist in developing a strategy to "guide local efforts to promote expanded business investment in the Omaha area." Coming out just prior to the Enron move to Houston, the study was remarkably clear in its perceptions of Omaha. It pointed out that Omaha had become a "corporate community in its middle age" and looked to those corporate professional managers for its civic leadership. As a result, Omaha offered "little encouragement to entrepreneurs until they have succeeded on their own. Then their achievement will be recognized quietly as long as they are not too pushy."³⁴

The 1980s in Omaha were a paradox. In one sense the city had indeed become a corporate community in its middle age and desperate to retain that segment of the business community at any price. The city had overlooked its entrepreneurial community leaders of early years, men like the Creightons or William Paxton, finding their modern-day counterparts a little too shaky for

business investment. As municipal government floundered, the business leaders stepped in to literally build a new major showpiece for downtown with the glittering new suburban-style campus of ConAgra rising on the riverfront where Omaha began.

Many of the old divisions remain in Omaha in the 1990s. The continuing political conflicts between sections of the city show up in most elections, and few politicians have yet been able to build lasting coalitions between the various factions. And Omaha is still searching for an image of itself. McManis and Associates reported that to many businessmen nationally, Omaha had no image with which they could relate as a potential business location.³⁵ Twenty years earlier, A. V. Sorensen sought a visual image he could use to sell Omaha but was emphatic in that he did not want a "bull on a pedestal." He did not want Omaha pictured as an "overgrown cow town," but instead as something that showed the "New Omaha" he had helped create.³⁶ It is ironic that one of Omaha's major events supported heavily by the business community is the annual River City Roundup, a fall festival that focuses on rodeos, barbecues, and a wild west past that never really had as much to do with Omaha's history as did the Ninth Street Warehouse Canyon.

This discussion began with a sense that the early leaders were the men of vision who had given their all to build the city. They were followed by the organization men, men who built on what their fathers had left them, and took Omaha through the Golden Age. In this scenario, the sons of these men, and grandsons of the pioneers, had failed to live up to their heritage. They, in turn, were followed by a community that expected and allowed the corporate leaders to take over and then complained when those men were increasingly not Omaha born and bred. In the 1980s, Omahans witnessed the logical end to these expectations. Men who were not raised in the city had fewer compunctions about moving

their corporations to other cities which offered a better deal.

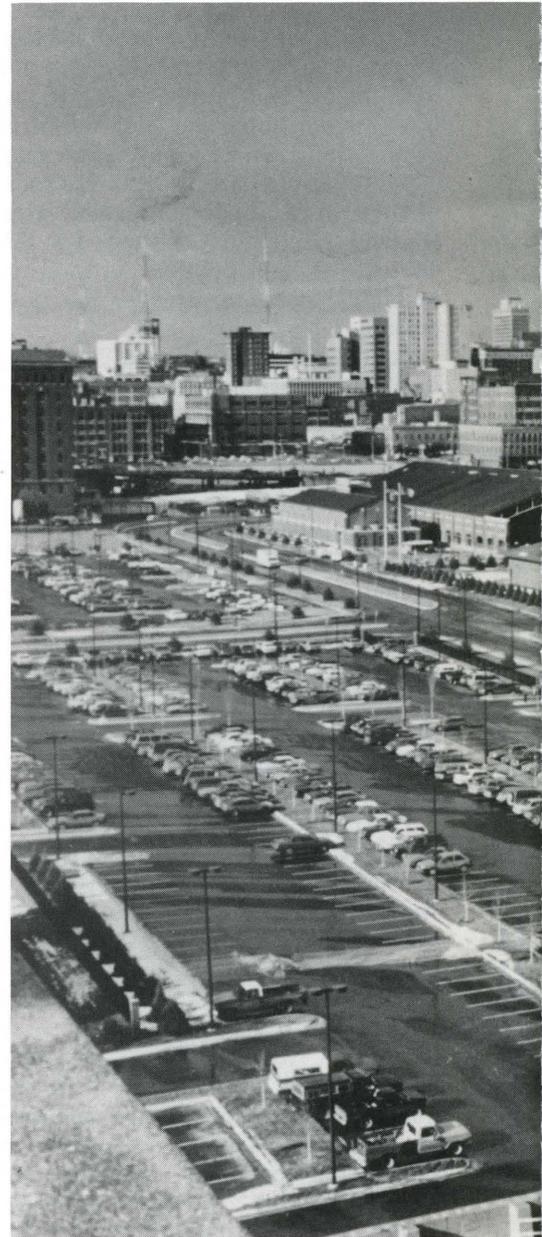
Yet that analysis must be tempered with the recognition that in every era, leaders have had to make decisions within the political, social, and economic context of the times in which they lived. Perhaps in examining this question over time we may gain a better sense of the continuum of advantages and constraints that have had a significant effect on Omaha's history.

One such continuing constraint is that Omaha has always been a city with a major element of control held by persons and companies in other cities. Even in the days of the pioneers, the major industries, like the railroads and stockyards, were controlled from a distance. This relationship continued through the early twentieth century, when even local control was in the hands of the political machine. Because of the Depression and World War II, much of what happened in the 1930s and 1940s was dictated by national events. And although the corporate leadership has played a role in Omaha since World War II, the city is a regional center that will always be more limited in its ability to control its future than major metropolitan centers such as Denver, Kansas City, or the Twin Cities.

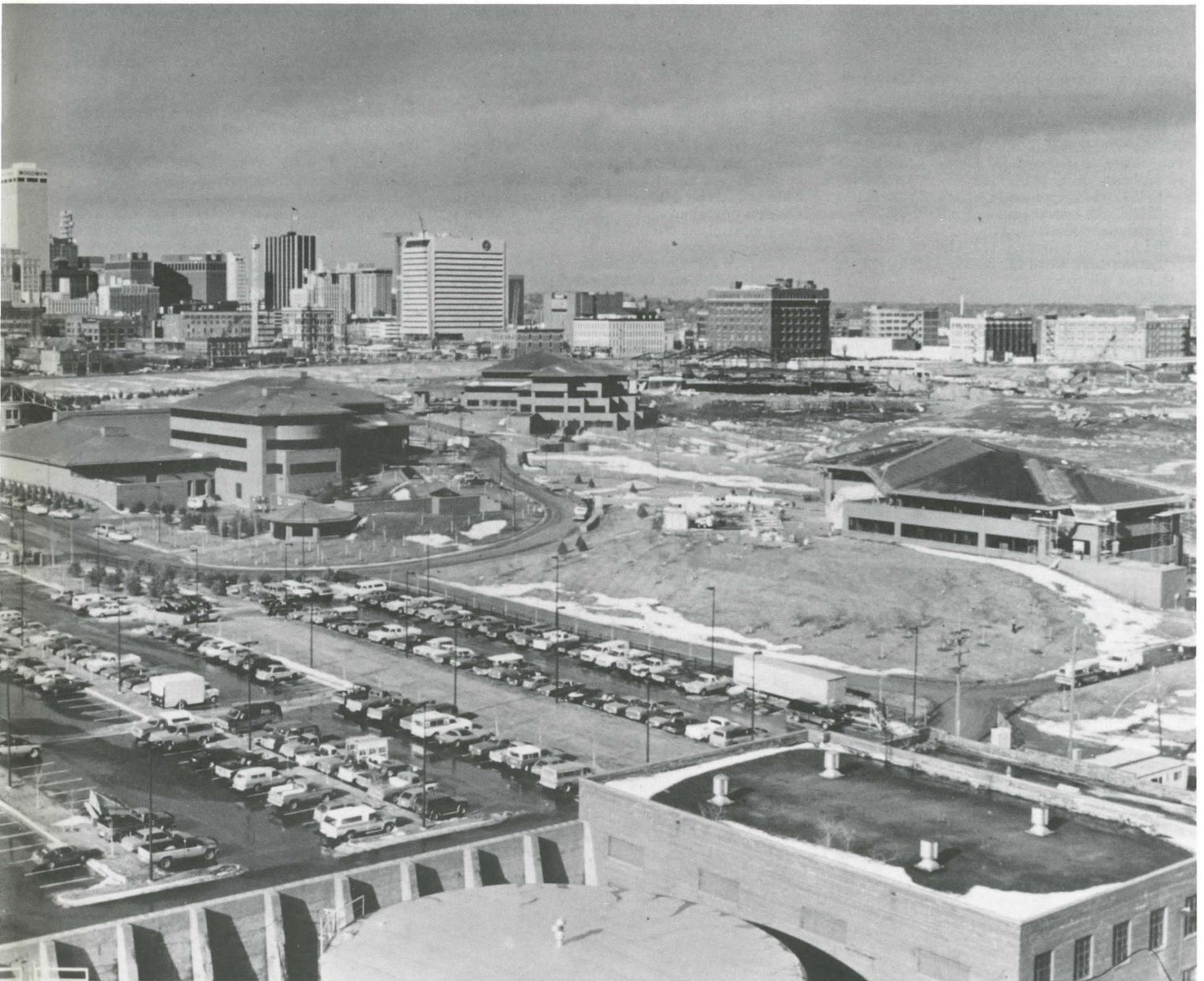
The political and economic changes of the 1980s and the continuing search for an image make leadership in Omaha a risky challenge for both political and business leaders. The last decade left no clear-cut consensus among Omahans of "where to go." Perhaps the 1990s will again see the rise of a leader who can build a lasting community coalition that can bridge the social, economic and political gaps in an increasingly fragmented city.

NOTES

¹See Garneth O. Peterson, "The Omaha City Council and Commission: A Profile, 1858-1930" (M.A. thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1980), 26-44; and Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission (historical text by Garneth O. Peterson), *A Comprehensive Program for Historic*



Leadership in Omaha



Omaha-Douglas County Civic Center. Courtesy of Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce . . . (above) Omaha's riverfront development taking shape, January 1990: (front right) building for Armour Food Company and two other ConAgra units; (front left) ConAgra's product development lab; (behind lab) Union Pacific train dispatching center; (right of dispatching center) ConAgra Frozen Foods building; and just-started ConAgra corporate headquarters. Courtesy of Omaha World-Herald.

Preservation in Omaha (Omaha City Planning Department, 1980), 22-23, for a more detailed discussion of Omaha's early leaders.

²Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission, *ibid.* (Hereafter abbreviated as LHPC).

³*Ibid.*; Lawrence H. Larsen and Barbara J. Cottrell, *The Gate City: A History of Omaha* (Boulder, Colorado: Pruett Publishing Co., 1982), 19-21; and George R. Leighton, "Omaha Nebraska - The Glory is Departed," *Harper's Magazine* 177(July and Aug. 1938):119.

⁴LHPC, 19; Larsen and Cottrell, 21-23, 131.

⁵LHPC, 33; Larsen and Cottrell, 72-74.

⁶Larsen and Cottrell, *ibid.*

⁷*Ibid.*, 64-65; Leighton, 113, 119.

⁸Larsen and Cottrell, 86-88; LHPC, 42-43; Leighton, 309.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰Larsen and Cottrell, 132-40; See William C. Pratt, "The Omaha Business Men's Association and the Open Shop, 1903-1909," *Nebraska History* 70(Summer 1989):172-83, for a thorough discussion of the BMA.

¹¹Pratt, 176-81; Orville D. Menard, *Political Bossism in Mid-America - Tom Dennison's Omaha, 1900-1933* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1989), 186-87.

¹²Garneth O. Peterson, "Annexation - The Omaha Story" (Omaha City Planning Department, undated); Peterson, "City Council and Commission," 66-72; See Richard K. Wilson, "Business Progressivism in Omaha: 1900-1917" (M.A. thesis, Creighton University, 1977), for a complete analysis of Progressive Era leadership and reform in Omaha.

¹³See Menard, *Political Bossism in Mid-America*, for a complete analysis of Tom Den-

nison's political machine and its impact on Omaha.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, *passim*. Larsen and Cottrell, 180-81.

¹⁵Menard, 76-84.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 307-12.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁸Pratt, 181.

¹⁹Menard, 310-12.

²⁰Larsen and Cottrell, 227, 230; *Omaha World-Herald*, Mar. 14, 1953; Jan. 8, 1965.

²¹Leighton, 326. I am indebted to Martin H. Shukert, former planning director of the city of Omaha, for sharing his insights on Omaha's geographical location and its effects on the city's development.

²²Larsen and Cottrell, 208-13.

²³"An American City's Dream," *Life* 23(July 7, 1947):23, 25.

²⁴Harl A. Dalstrom, *A.V. Sorensen and the New Omaha* (Omaha: Lamplighter Press, Douglas County Historical Society, 1987), 24.

²⁵"An American City's Dream," 25.

²⁶Dalstrom, *A.V. Sorensen*, 24. See Janet Rose Daly, "The Changing Image of the City: Planning for Downtown Omaha" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1987), for a complete analysis of post-war planning and public/private leadership in Omaha from 1945 to the early 1970s.

²⁷Jim Clemon, review of *A.V. Sorensen and the New Omaha* by Harl A. Dalstrom, *Sunday World Herald Entertainment Magazine*, April 10, 1988. See Harl A. Dalstrom, *A.V. Sorensen and the New Omaha* for a detailed discussion of A.V. Sorensen's entire political career and its significant impact on Omaha.

²⁸Dalstrom, *A.V. Sorensen*, *ibid.*

²⁹Dalstrom, *A.V. Sorensen*, 294; Paul Williams, "Omaha's Power Structure," *Dundee and West Omaha Sun*, April 7, 1966.

³⁰Williams, *ibid.* See Harl A. Dalstrom, "Omaha's East-West Voting Division," paper presented at Missouri Valley History Conference, Omaha, Nebraska, Mar. 8, 1990, for a discussion of both historic and recent voting patterns in the city.

³¹Paul Hammel, "Who Wields the Power in Omaha?" *Benson Sun*, July 22, 1981.

³²This commentary is based on my personal recollections and opinions developed while a city planner with the city of Omaha, Mar. 1980 to Oct. 1989. It is not intended to attempt to evaluate all the major political or economic changes experienced by Omaha in the 1980s. These highlights are included in order to provide a beginning framework for analyzing a very important and critical decade in the city's history.

³³*Ibid.*; "Riverfront Review," unpublished chronology of ConAgra riverfront development (Office of Economic and Policy Development, City of Omaha, undated). See Leonard K. Eaton, *Gateway Cities and Other Essays* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1989) for his discussion of the architectural and historic significance of the Warehouse Canyon and the efforts by preservationists to prevent its demolition.

³⁴McManis Associates, Inc. and Growth Strategies Organization, *Economic Development Strategy Study*, Prepared for the city of Omaha, Douglas County and Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Spring 1986, i, ii, 1-24.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 111-3.

³⁶Dalstrom, *A.V. Sorensen*, 290.