



THE MUSEUM GAZETTE

Luther Ely Smith: Founder of a Memorial

He was a soft-spoken man who got things done. Lawyer, self-proclaimed do-gooder, he fought for the little guy and dreamed big dreams for his community. And he made his dreams become reality. One of these visions was for a riverfront park for St. Louis, now called Jefferson National Expansion Memorial. The park was meant to commemorate St. Louis' role in the opening of the American West, revitalize the blighted riverfront district, and put St. Louisans to work during the Great Depression. But Smith's idea accomplished far more, for his efforts resulted in the creation of an enduring symbol for the city itself, as well as its most successful tourist attraction.

Luther Ely Smith was born on June 11, 1873 at Downer's Grove, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago. His parents went South after the Civil War as "carpetbaggers," helping to reorganize the defeated Southern states and assist newly-freed slaves on the road to autonomy. When reconstruction ended in 1877 they returned to Illinois, where Luther spent most of his childhood. Smith's parents were affluent enough to send him to the best schools. He graduated from Williston Academy in Easthampton, Massachusetts in 1890, and received an A.B. degree from Amherst College in 1894. Harlan F. Stone, who later was appointed Chief Justice of the United States, was his classmate. Smith also befriended Calvin Coolidge and Dwight W. Morrow at Amherst; they were a class behind him.

Upon graduation from Amherst, Smith came to St. Louis and attended Washington University,

where he obtained a law degree in 1897. When the Spanish-American War was declared in 1898, Smith volunteered and was sent to Cuba with the Third U.S. Volunteer Engineers. He mustered out with the rank of lieutenant.

After his return from the war, Luther Ely Smith was admitted to the bar of Missouri in 1899. Smith was a Republican, although he described himself as "a native Republican who has never voted a straight ticket." He was a member of the St. Louis Civil Liberties Committee, and often took cases where he felt an injustice had been done, to fight for the underdog. Not content with merely practicing law, Smith also embarked on a life-long campaign of public service to his community. At the turn of the century, he organized an Open-Air Playground Committee in St. Louis, which brought the city its first municipal playgrounds. In May 1914, he organized the Pageant-Masque performed on Art Hill in Forest Park before huge crowds. From this event the Municipal Opera of St. Louis (the MUNY) later emerged. Smith was also chairman of the City Plan Commission, and brought architect Harland Bartholomew to St. Louis to work on a city plan in 1916.

Luther Ely Smith married Sa Lees Kennard, and had three children: Addeline, who married Ingram Boyd; Sa Lees, who married John W. Seddon; and Luther Ely Smith, Jr., who was later a law partner with his father. He introduced his children to the pleasures of the great outdoors and his passion for bird watching.

When the United States entered World War I in 1917, 44-year-old Luther Smith volunteered once more for military service, serving as a captain in the Field Artillery. After the war, Smith served as chairman of the St. Louis Council of Civic Needs from 1929 to 1938. He worked on the creation of Memorial Plaza, smoke elimination, slum clearance, recreational development and conservation. In the 1920s he also became involved in projects with a national scope. He was a member of the federal commission which built the George Rogers Clark Memorial at Vincennes, Indiana. He was appointed by his old college friend Calvin Coolidge, who was by then President of the United States.

Shortly after Thanksgiving, 1933, Luther Smith returned by train from a meeting on the Clark Memorial. As he gazed out the windows of the train at the decaying St. Louis riverfront district, he realized that only drastic action could improve it, yet decades of history existed in its narrow streets. Thinking about the memorial commission for George Rogers Clark, an idea occurred to him which would consume a good share of the last 18 years of his life. Then and there his cause became the demolition of the shabby riverfront buildings and the creation of an open-air park along the Mississippi River devoted to the history of his adopted city.

It should be noted that the idea was not a new one. Several schemes had been discussed over the years to revitalize the St. Louis riverfront area, but none of the earlier plans gained enough popular support or political backing to become realities. Smith brought his idea to Mayor Bernard Dickmann, a New Deal Democrat who called a meeting on December 15, 1933 of civic and business leaders, including historian McCune Gill. The group liked the plan and formed a committee to look into the matter further. Smith was named chairman, Dickmann vice chairman. In April 1934 this committee obtained a state charter as a non-profit organization called the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial Association (JNEMA). Smith was the first president of JNEMA, and served (with the exception of one year) from 1934 to 1949.

Smith and Dickmann worked hard to push the project on the Federal level, feeling that local money alone could not build the type of memorial they were hoping for and that the memorial should be national rather than regional in scope. They were able to convince Congress to provide funds and to sanction a federal commission similar to the one for the George Rogers Clark Memorial. Beginning with the creation of the United States Territorial Expansion Memorial Commission in 1934 Smith's work was cut out for him. His granddaughter Christine recalled that his task was nearly impossible. "But he seemed never to tire of working on it. I think one of my favorite quotes of his is that 'if somebody doesn't agree with you, you didn't explain yourself well enough.' Not that you're wrong, but that you just need to explain your ideas better. And I think it's that sort of thinking that kept him going through all the years of discouragement. It wasn't a great time to start a Federal project! He just quietly kept working on things, and didn't want any hoopla for himself. He initiated breakfast meetings, not taking no for an answer when people said 'oh, I'm too busy to meet with you about this over lunch.' He would invite them to his house for coffee at 7:30 a.m., and few people had an excuse for something else they had to do at that time of day."

The Commission's executive committee approved plans for the memorial, including proposed boundaries for the memorial area, the definition of the area's historical significance, a national architectural competition, and the cost estimate of \$30 million for acquisition of land, development and planning. The St. Louis Board of Aldermen passed an ordinance permitting a special bond issue election to contribute \$7.5 million toward the memorial. On September 10, 1935, the people of St. Louis voted on the bond proposal. It was a controversial issue, with well-organized and vocal adherents on both sides of the question. The proposal passed, but local court challenges to its validity threatened to tie up the entire matter in litigation. During 1935, Smith kept the idea alive by writing letters to congressmen. One office actually wrote back requesting that Smith stop sending letters to them: they'd gotten the message!

Despite a ruling by Attorney General Homer

Cummings that the Federal Government could not legally support the establishment and construction of the memorial, Smith and Mayor Dickmann, applied political pressure and were undeterred. They forced a reversal in policy and on December 21, 1935, President Roosevelt signed an executive order permitting the secretary of the interior to acquire and develop Jefferson National Expansion Memorial. "This makes a mighty fine ending of the old year," declared Smith.

The city acquired properties along the riverfront by condemnation rather than purchase, and this method was backed up by a 1939 court decision. Smith was opposed to this, and felt that the Federal Government should purchase the property outright. "Tearing down the riverfront buildings was a pretty controversial thing," remembered Smith's granddaughter. "A lot of people felt that it was the heart of St. Louis, and it was being ripped out. But I think that he was thoroughly convinced that this was the right thing to do." The 90-acre site for the memorial was entirely cleared by May 1942.

Just as progress was being made on the project, the United States was plunged into World War II. While the country was wrapped up in the war effort, funds for the memorial were used elsewhere, and Luther Ely Smith moved on to other projects. In 1941 he served as chairman of the state organization committee for the non-partisan court plan, which took the appointment of Missouri's appellate court judges out of the hands of political bosses and is still in force today. Smith was also appointed to the city's first Civil Service Commission where he combated the spoils system.

With the conclusion of World War II, Smith wanted only to get the riverfront project moving again. He tried to raise \$225,000 for the architectural competition, but finding that he was still \$40,000 shy of this goal in 1946, he personally underwrote the balance. Smith expressed his own thoughts on what the memorial should be in 1944. He felt that there should be a central feature, a shaft, a building, an arch, or something which would symbolize American culture and civilization. Smith wanted

something "transcending in spiritual and aesthetic values," and which would attract visitors from other nations. His granddaughter remembered that "he had a greater vision of the city than what it was. He felt that you needed to do something fairly dramatic to improve downtown, and attract people to downtown. He felt that the heart of the city was the river. That's where the city had started, that's where its roots were, that's why it's here in the first place." In February 1947 the architectural competition ended when the jury unanimously chose design number 144, by Eero Saarinen. The design was for a beautiful, soaring stainless steel arch, with landscaped grounds and a museum.

The Gateway Arch fulfilled Luther Ely Smith's vision of the riverfront park. He wrote to Eero Saarinen in 1948, saying that "It was your design, your marvelous conception, your brilliant forecast into the future, that has made the realization of the dream possible - a dream that you and the wonderful genius at your command and the able assistance of your associates are going to achieve far beyond the remotest possibility that we had dared visualize in the beginning."

But Luther Ely Smith would never see the monument he worked so hard to create. The area was still a field of weeds when he died. As he walked to work on April 2, 1951, he suffered a sudden heart attack and collapsed in the 4900 block of Maryland Avenue. He was 77 years old, and was buried in Bellefontaine Cemetery. The Globe-Democrat editorialized: "The memorial he leaves is written in better government, better playgrounds for children, better homes and schools, better recreation for all. A good citizen, a cultured gentleman in the old tradition with a zest for helpful living has departed, and he will not be forgotten... Somehow he always had time and never seemed in a hurry... Those who are calling for a revival in public morals need not search long for an example of the good man. They need only hold up the life of Luther Ely Smith." Smith's legacy lives on today in the memorial he envisioned on the St. Louis riverfront, and a small park located between the Gateway Arch and the Old Courthouse which is named in his honor.