

Jay B. Dillingham

Businessman

1910–2007

By Daniel Coleman

The list of Kansas City institutions and projects bearing the mark of Jay Dillingham is lengthy and covers much of the metropolitan area map. Kansas City International Airport, Interstate 435, the American Royal, Maple Woods Community College, Smithville Lake, and the National Agricultural Center and Hall of Fame would not exist in their current forms without his guiding hand. But it was in his role as “landlord” of the Kansas City Stockyards, once the center of Kansas City’s economy, that Dillingham’s special talent of convincing people to work together first emerged. He never strayed far from the old stockyards way of doing business, where a “handshake and a man’s word” meant everything, and those who worked with Dillingham knew his primary aim was always to do what he felt was best for Kansas City.



A giant in stature as well as influence (he stood 6’ 3” even without his ever-present Stetson hat), Jay B. Dillingham was born March 8, 1910, in Platte City, Missouri, to Edna Chestnut and Joseph B. Dillingham, a farmer and harness shop operator. As a youth, Jay worked for a Platte City grocer, saving his wages to pay for clothes and later tuition at Central Business College in Kansas City. Clerking for a railroad company during the day, Dillingham attended night classes at the Kansas City School of Law and graduated in 1935. On September 28th of that year he married Frances Thompson, a descendant of area pioneers, at her family’s Maple Tree Stock Farm in Clay County.

But Dillingham never practiced law. Instead, at a time when livestock was Kansas City’s primary industry, he went to work in the Kansas City Stockyards. In 1948 he moved from horseback to a roll-top desk, beginning a 27-year reign over the 260 West Bottoms acres from which an estimated 25,000 Kansas Citians derived their livelihood. Ranchers, traders, cowboys, and packing company workers were among those who depended upon the

constant flow of cattle (as many as 64,000 in one day during a peak year), sheep, hogs, horses and mules through the pens. Dillingham, who once remarked that he did not find the smell of manure objectionable because of what it represented—"food on the table" for so many—worked seven days a week to keep the stockyards running smoothly. His response to the 1951 Flood, which devastated the West Bottoms, was heroic. The annual American Royal livestock expo began on schedule just a few months after the disaster, a reassuring feat of Dillingham's leadership and resilience.

Presiding at the Golden Ox Steakhouse (another Kansas City institution he helped create) or from his 9th floor office in the Livestock Exchange Building, Dillingham's remarkable ability to build relationships among disparate groups led to the completion of numerous area projects. Bridging bi-state rivalries, he led the Chambers of Commerce of both Kansas City, Missouri, and Kansas City, Kansas. He was appointed to the Missouri Highway and Transportation Commission by a Democratic and Republican governor in turn, where he worked to defuse factionalism between Kansas City and St. Louis. Dillingham maintained close relationships with presidents Truman and Eisenhower, and was instrumental in such milestones of regional development as Kansas City's annexation north of the Missouri River, Federal flood control projects in the Kansas River basin, and the creation of Interstate 435.

Dillingham never left his beloved Northland. He and wife Frances, to whom he was married nearly 72 years, raised their son John on her family's ancestral farm near the junction of today's I-435, Missouri Highway 291, and U.S. 169, and when Dillingham finally slowed to six-day workweeks in his 80s, the couple spent his day off touring the much changed Clay and Platte counties. The Kansas City Stockyards officially ceased to exist in 1991, but Dillingham kept his office in the now historic Livestock Exchange Building and exerted a behind-the-scenes influence by mentoring a new generation of Kansas City leaders. Among his many civic honors was the symbolic naming of Interstate 670, which runs in both Kansas and Missouri, after him. He died at age 97 on August 13, 2007.

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