

# Kenneth and Helen Spencer

Industrialist and Benefactor

Kenneth (1902-1960); Helen (1902-1982)

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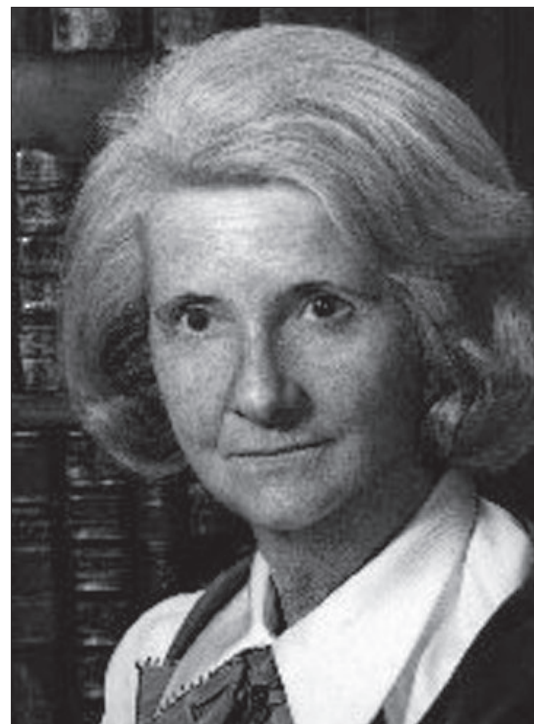
by Daniel Coleman

As president and director of the Kenneth A. and Helen F. Spencer Foundation, Helen Spencer's talent lay in her instinct for choosing philanthropies of great importance to the community. A colleague later remarked that "she was always right" in this regard. Her husband Kenneth devoted his life to harnessing the natural resources, scientific know-how, and work ethic of Kansas and Missouri, and the Spencers, lifelong Midwesterners who were proud of their roots, sought to play a significant role in the region's further advancement.

When he was born in 1902, Kenneth Spencer represented the third generation of his family to live in Kansas. His grandfather, John W. Spencer, had driven cattle from Texas to Kansas in the 1860s and homesteaded in the southeast part of the state after serving as a Union cavalryman in the Civil War. Kenneth's father, Charles F. Spencer, transformed a small coal mine on the family ranch into the Pittsburg & Midway Coal Co.

Young Kenneth seemed destined to join the family business when, as a boy, he designed and constructed his own miniature working steam shovel. The family moved from Columbus, Kansas, to Pittsburg, Kansas, in 1912, and there Kenneth met his future wife, Helen Foresman, when they attended the same high school. Helen, the daughter of Frances Foster and Long-Bell Lumber man Frank W. Foresman, was born in Joplin, Missouri, and had lived in Neosho and Amarillo, Texas, before moving to Pittsburg. She wore Kenneth's fraternity pin when both studied at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, but exchanged it for a wedding band on January 6, 1927.

After graduation, Kenneth, who studied geology at KU and enrolled in as many mining and engineering classes as were offered, went to work for Pittsburg & Midway Coal Co. and learned the coal mining business during his first decade with the company. By 1940, he had developed an elaborate and ambitious blueprint for industrial development in the Pittsburg area. The plan kicked into action during World War II when Spencer won a government contract to



create and manage the Jayhawk Ordnance Works, an explosives plant near Baxter Springs. Spencer risked the entire coal mining assets of his family's previous two generations as a performance bond with the War Department, which was hesitant to locate the project in the Midwest. The resulting Jayhawk plant was one of the great engineering successes of the war effort. Spencer also implemented a shell-loading plant near Parsons and a smokeless powder factory near Pryor, Oklahoma—each a component of his master plan.

Because Spencer saw that the pioneering process by which he had created ammonium nitrate for the military could also be used to replenish nitrogen in soil, another of his goals made the leap from paper to reality when, after the war, he established a fertilizer plant near Joplin. He purchased the wartime facilities and founded Spencer Chemical Company, which added plants in Chicago, Ohio, Kentucky, and Mississippi as it diversified into the production of formaldehyde and plastics during the 1950s.

Spencer also served on the boards of Goodyear, International Harvester, the Missouri-Kansas-Texas (MKT) Railroad, Armco Steel, and Southwestern Bell, piloting himself in his own small aircraft to distant meetings from Kansas City, where he made the Dwight Building his downtown headquarters. Sadly, the man who once commented to a reporter that his favorite hobby was simply "to make things work," died in the prime of his career, at age 58 on February 20, 1960.

After her husband's death, Helen Spencer devoted herself to the philanthropic support of metro area cultural institutions, joining such lights as William Volker and William Rockhill Nelson in the pantheon of great Kansas City benefactors. Gifts to the University of Kansas, the University of Missouri-Kansas City, and the Nelson-Atkins Museum established buildings, theaters, libraries, and professorships. The Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas reflects Helen Spencer's passion for the arts, and her generosity extended to the Midwest Research Institute, of which her husband was a co-founder, as well as St. Luke's Hospital, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, and the YMCA.

Helen Spencer was a private woman who avoided the spotlight during her life, but long after her death on February 15, 1982, her benefactions continue to voice the affection she and her husband felt for the Kansas City area.

## Sources

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