

# Barney L. Allis

Hotelier

1886-1962

by Daniel Coleman

One snowy December night as he was selling newspapers on the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> and Walnut to help feed his family, a young, entranced Barney Allis followed a wealthy stranger for several blocks simply to warm himself in the man's aura of security and success. This brief, waking dream served as a touchstone for Barney Allis throughout his Dickensian childhood, and its importance to him persisted throughout his years as Kansas City's premier hotelier.

Born in 1886, Barney Allis arrived in Kansas City at the age of two, the son of Jewish immigrants from Poland. One of seven children, he went to work as early as age six to help support his family after the failure of his father's small downtown shop and his formal schooling ended after the fourth grade. Allis acquired an education of a different kind in scraps with bigger and older boys, defending the street corner he had staked out for selling the *Kansas City World*. By age 12 he was earning \$2.50 per week in a print shop, where he stood on a small wooden box he carried to compensate for his small size.

He reached only 5' 3" in adulthood, but the fighting spirit in Allis was rarely matched by his coworkers, nor was his brainpower. Quickly picking up the applied math and grammar of the printing business, he became an invaluable employee of the Burd and Fletcher Co. At 19 he was managing another shop—the K.C. Bill of Fare Press. Establishing a pattern he would later repeat in the hotel business, Allis made an exhaustive study of his trade during this period, even spending his first ever vacation visiting a type foundry in Jersey City.

The K.C. Bill of Fare Press specialized in printing for the hotel and restaurant industry, and Allis originated a highly successful trade journal for the owners and managers who were his customers. *Tavern Talk* was among the first publications of its kind in the U.S., and Allis met another large demand when he created the first uniform accounting forms for hotels. He became a partner, then bought out K.C. Bill of Fare's original owner and renamed the business Allis Press.



Meanwhile his numerous conversations with leaders in the industry and careful study of the hotel business led him to believe he might find success as a hotel operator. During the 1920s he acquired an ownership stake in Joplin's Connor Hotel and Columbia's Daniel Boone Tavern, but did not achieve greatness in this new role until 1931, when he assumed control of the Muehlebach Hotel at 12<sup>th</sup> and Baltimore in downtown Kansas City, Missouri. Allis' zealous attention to detail, high standards for physical accommodations, and insistence on excellent service brought the Muehlebach into the ranks of the world's best hotels. For decades it was the City's largest, and counted among its guests most of the city's VIP visitors, including presidents, royalty, cabinet members, and entertainers.

Allis found it difficult to separate his love for the Muehlebach from his enthusiasm for Kansas City's downtown neighborhood, and he became involved with efforts in the postwar period to plan and promote the area. Ailing in the early months of 1962, he sold the Muehlebach that January for around \$15 million. He collapsed from a heart attack within blocks of the Muehlebach and died on April 17, 1962. Barney Allis Plaza, situated atop the Municipal Auditorium Plaza Garage he played such a crucial role in developing, now honors his devotion to Kansas City.

### **Sources**

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