

William Volker

Businessman and Philanthropist
1859-1947

by Daniel Coleman

William Volker arrived in Kansas City in 1882, seeking to do business in a town where rapid settlement and advantageous rail and river access had created one of the Midwest's most robust economies. Volker had spent less than half of his 23 years in the United States; he had immigrated with his parents from Germany at age 12 to Chicago, where his parents remained.

He mastered English quickly, but in observing the struggles and suffering of ordinary people rebuilding from the ashes of that city's Great Fire of 1871, Volker learned the greater lessons of his life. Two decades after his arrival in Kansas City, he was one of the region's richest men. While many of that era consumed their wealth in pursuit of luxury and ever larger fortunes, Volker saw himself and his money rather as an instrument for attacking the roots of poverty and improving the lives of others.

Volker began his business career clerking at a dry goods store, already dressed in the simple dark suit and bowtie he would wear for the rest of his many years. He soon became known for his quiet competence.

From a small sum of seed money he brought with him to Kansas City, he founded William Volker & Company, which began as a picture frame wholesaler operating out of rented quarters at 6th and Delaware. He added a wildly successful line of window shades that grew to include a wide selection of home furnishings. Eventually, Volker had branch offices in most of the major cities of the West.

Volker lived and conducted business with a distinctive style, characterized by the simple directive which had been carved on the front door of his family's former home in Germany: "Work and Pray." An homage from the Kansas City Chamber of Commerce once described him as "always in even temper, and thrifty of words," and his unpretentious home at 3717 Bell earned him the nickname "Mr. Anonymous of Bell Street."



Among Kansas City's wealthiest individuals by his mid 40s, Volker married Rose Roebke of Holton, Kansas, in 1911. He held back \$1 million in her name and dedicated his life to giving the rest of his wealth away. He did it quietly, of course—close friends believed that up to 90 percent of his philanthropies were unknown. But many of his public contributions still bear his name, including the Volker Campus of UMKC, born of a gift of land, money, and books.

His contributions and interest in public health created Research Medical Center, and he helped found Kansas City's Board of Public Welfare and Civic Research Institute. These organizations sought to improve the conditions of disadvantaged neighborhoods and pursue reforms in city government, and Volker was known to provide funds to each when budget limitations stood in the way of projects.

Perhaps the most telling of his philanthropies was the "morning salon of wants," where he personally received callers seeking financial aid for various reasons. This took place daily in his Bell Street home. William Volker died there on November 4, 1947; it has been estimated that by the last decade of his life, Volker was sending assistance on a monthly basis to over 100 individuals.

Sources

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