

L. P. Cookingham

Kansas City's First City Manager
1896-1992

by Barbara Magerl

In the early, post-Pendergast period in Kansas City government, selection of the city's first professional city manager was critical. The special person chosen, L. P. "Perry" Cookingham, became the 'czar of Kansas City.'

Born in Chicago, Cookingham had worked his way up from being a railroad surveyor in Illinois to being president of the International City Managers Association. A *Reader's Digest* article about him led to his being chosen from 50 candidates for the job here.

When he took over the newly created position in 1940, some reform-minded leaders were concerned that he didn't make changes fast enough. Wisely, he moved slowly at first, then totally overhauled city government, creating a new image for the once scandalous city. He was praised later for restoring dignity, self-respect, and honesty at city hall.

Cookingham sliced payrolls, cut jobs based on friendship, stopped graft, required bids for work projects, and instituted a merit system for employees based on work records. Lowering utility rates through lawsuits was one way he delivered more for the residents' taxes.

He crafted a parks and recreation program with new parks and creative recreation projects for youngsters. He demanded that city employees be "clean, neat, and courteous."

Cookingham became noted for his 'training school in government.' Recognized as the dean of city managers, he was a magnet. People competed for the chance to work with him in Kansas City.

He was listed in *Who's Who in America*, was president of the American Society of Planning Officials, and sought after nationally as a lecturer on public administration.

During his tenure, Kansas City annexed the northland, where a street bears his name. Cookingham resigned his position in 1959,



living briefly out of state, but returned to spend the rest of his life in his beloved Kansas City. He was executive director of People to People International 1963-67 and served the city again as a member, then president, of the Parks and Recreation board. He died July 22, 1992, at age 95.

Sources

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