The Mercantile Library Staff’s Love Letter to the St. Louis Community

The Mercantile Library grew up with St. Louis and has saved its story for generations. St. Louis was and is a city of groundbreakers, explorers and pathfinders- Pierre LaClede, Auguste Chouteau, Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, Jedediah Smith, Charles Lindbergh, leading to McDonnell Douglas and the Age of Space. It was and is also a city of scientists, with the leaders of the railroad surveys or other early reconnaissance and scientific parties of the government passing through its streets and using the town for a base long ago; or of Henry Shaw and George Engelmann, down to the great medical and chemical companies like Monsanto and Mallinckrodt. In turn it was and is a city of learning and research, with St. Louis University, Washington University and the University of Missouri making their home among a myriad of age-old educational institutions.

It was and is a city of authors and journalists, from Mark Twain to Kate Chopin, from T.S. Eliot and Tennessee Williams to Joseph Pulitzer, Howard Nemerov, Burroughs and Gass, William Reedy and so many others, and it was and is a city of art and artists, from George Caleb Bingham to Charles Deas, from Carl Wimar, to Charlie Russell and Joseph Meeker, from Harriet Hosmer and Oscar Berninghaus to a host of their descendants.

It was and is a city of thinkers, scholars, priests and clerics, merchants, athletes, brewers, fighters, entrepreneurs, craftspeople, architects, musicians, engineers, politicians and soldiers- Benton, Grant, Sherman, Denton Snyder, John Mason Peck, Pierre De Smet, Friedrich Hecker, Dred Scott, Virginia Masters, John Francis McDermott, and Charles van Ravenswaay, Robert Campbell, Louis Sullivan, James Eads, Eero Saarinen, Helen Traubel, Grace Bumbry, Chuck Berry, Scott Joplin and Josephine Baker, Stan Musial and Lou Brock, Jack Buck and Jim Hart.

It was and is a city of people of all walks, of all nationalities, trades and purposes represented by a desire before most other American cities existed to explore, to trade, and settle half a continent. Never really a frontier city as much as it was a capital and a destiny rather than a destination- a “common ground”- for generations of a movement needing a beacon and a home base, St. Louis has left a long legacy of the past from which it beckons new generations of visitors to explore its historic buildings, streets and monuments. These byways commemorate in many ways the origins of the West, right down to the trail markers from Santa Fe and Oregon, to Route 66, the city where that road made its sweeping westward bend to the horizon.

A crossroads and a model of western community building since 1764, and placed at virtually the same point of a confluence of four great rivers as an even older city, Cahokia, had been for untold generations, St. Louis today reflects in its people north, south, east and of course west, its most sentimentally-tied direction and orientation. A city of great schools, industries, service organizations of all kinds, and, deep historical depth, the legendary town has become a cultural laboratory for the study of American urban growth, decay, rehabilitation and progress through many eras. It is a city which emanated from the American heartland and today beckons for the whole nation to feel at once a part. Always a city of “firsts West of the Mississippi” from the Eads Bridge to the earliest library, golf course, baseball team, book or newspaper, among so many others which even claim the hot dogs and ice cream cones of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904, these appellations are taken in stride, modestly, but proudly here, as a way of life. Come share our proud heritage in and commitment to this great nurturing city.