

KS Hill reflects 80 years of K-State history

Robin Farrell Edmunds
Staff Writer **Page 11**

If you're new to town, you can't help but notice the gigantic white letters embedded in the hill overlooking the Kansas River on the city's east side.

No, they don't stand for the state's abbreviation. Instead, the letters represent the pride felt by members of a previous generation for the university they were attending.

A Collegian news article said talk of building a "K" was bantered about as early as April 1915. Sometime prior to 1921 one class did build a letter of loose rock on Blument Hill, but it didn't last.

Nothing of real substance occurred until the 1920-21 school year.

In the May 1930 edition of the Kansas State Engineer magazine, Art Brewer (class of 1921) said the idea for the "K" came from a classmate who attended school in New Mexico at the New Mexico School of Mines.

This classmate — whose name Brewer no longer recalled — landed in Manhattan and told the story of the big "M" the boys had built some 60 miles away out in the mountains.

Brewer, a senior and president of the Civil Engineering Society, mentioned that students at Kansas State Agricultural College (as it was called then) wouldn't have to travel that far to put up their letter. A site known as Mt. Prospect on the east side of town was chosen.

Students in the engineering society took the lead in the project, but the entire school appeared to take part.

Classes were alternately dismissed (freshman and juniors in the morning; sophomores and seniors in the afternoon) on the designated spring day in 1921. "Engineers marched to the hill led by a brass band" composed of still more engineers, according to information in the Archives of Hale Library. Sand and water for the concrete were pulled to the top of the hill in horse-drawn

wagons.

"One of the worst troubles was in preventing the concrete from running over the formwork, and thus taking a joy ride down the hill," Brewer wrote. "The boys couldn't resist pouring in more and more water in the mixer, with the result that the concrete was sloppy."

According to the 1946 Collegian article, "in the center of the letter they placed a bronze star in memory of the Aggies who lost their lives in World War I."

Upon completion, the "K" measured 80 feet long and 60 feet wide. Its stems were 12 feet wide and one foot deep.

It would be another nine years before the

Talk of building a "K" was bantered about as early as April 1915.

letter "S" was added. Money for that project was raised by sponsoring movies and boxing matches and from donations given by faculty and local businesses.

The job of maintaining the letters was given to engineering freshmen until 1947 when pledges of Sigma Tau, an engineering honors society, took over.

During the 1951 flood, the soil beneath the "K" was undermined by the water. Three years later in 1954, the foot of the K dropped down the 60-degree hill.

It was finally repaired during the spring of 1959. That same year the college became Kansas State University, and ever since then discussion surfaces of the possibility of adding a "U" to the hillside.

Costs — estimated as prohibitive — and questions about the soundness of the potential additional letter site have quieted such

talk.

But, like clockwork, each fall the letters get a fresh new face courtesy of members of Tau Beta Pi, the national engineering honors society, which merged with Sigma Tau in 1974.

The cleaning has traditionally occurred after the K-State/KU football match-up, but Tau Beta Pi tried something new last year said Troy Brin, outgoing president.

Instead of having the pledges do the work in mid-to-late October, Brin said they completed clean-up by mid-September. And it will be that way this year, too, because the chapter is on a very strict time-line, he said.

He said Manhattan will host the Tau Beta Pi National Convention this October and as part of its hosting duties, the local chapter is also responsible for presenting a model initiation.

"Our new members are going to be initiated in front of 500 people," he said.

Since cleaning the letters is a pledge responsibility, it will have to be completed prior to the convention.

Work is tentatively scheduled for a Saturday in mid-to-late September, he said. A later fall clean-up time will resume in 1999.

How to get to KS Hill

If you want to take in a great view of the area, drive or bike across the viaduct and go past the McDowell Creek Road exit. When Kansas 18 East turns to the left, you turn right and then take another immediate right onto Pillsbury Drive.

Follow that road until it turns left into Crestline Drive. The road winds up and around, and, as you're nearing the top of the hill, you'll see off to the right an unmarked gravel road accented with railroad ties. Take it and you'll be able to park in a small overlook area. It's not fenced off, so watch your step. The letters are below you and the city is in front of you. You'll not only get to take in a great view, but you'll also be acknowledging a little bit of campus history.