

Retired pastor and former Nebraska State Senator Lowen Kruse enjoys rare capitol experience

by Lowen Kruse

“The Omaha World-Herald requested this article, published Feb. 7. I have added a bit of background to it. Included is a photo we will not see for another 100 years—of anyone sitting on the sower’s shoulders. That takes repair scaffold all the way up. So, here I am, sitting 400 ft. above contradiction. Not bad for a pastor or senator.” - Lowen

Nebraska has a rare gift: our magnificent capitol building. The combination of bold design and superb artistry was unique in the 1920s and today shares an elite place in national architecture. It is handmade—from stone to cabinets.

Several fortuitous conditions came together for it to happen.

If attempted 20 years earlier, there would not have been the technology and equipment to construct the tower. If attempted 20 years later, too few stone hand craftsmen would have been available.

If Thomas Kimball, nationally known Omaha architect, had not managed the bidding, eminent architects would not have responded. The winner, Bertram Goodhue of Philadelphia, trusted Kimball and submitted his dream building.

Without Kimball’s reputation we would have a copy of the national capitol as other states were building. Local politics used local talent and blocked bold plans.

The tower required newly designed steel in place of the usual cast iron. Without Dakota sandstone bedrock, the tower could not be supported.

If Goodhue had not contracted with four exceptional thematic consultants/artists, the stunning progression of art would not be.

The “Roaring Twenties” allowed the legislature to be brave. The body authorized \$5 million in 1919, but when they saw how grand their capitol could be, they doubled the budget to \$10 million. Today, no state could afford to build it. (The current 10-year renovation is \$57 million.)

Renovating the tower was a challenge. Onlookers assumed it was a tall stack of stones, but it is not. Stone could not support that weight unless the base were much wider, which would ruin those beautiful straight lines. An inner steel skeleton provides a table at each floor starting over the rows of stone.

Support for the tower is a fascinating grid of hundreds of cement pillars, three foot across, formed in holes up to 40 feet deep and hand dug.

Several senators made the trip up the scaffolding to visit that green fellow 400 feet in the air, spreading seed across our fair land. The sower consists of nine tons of cast bronze, polished for one year. Amazingly, he moves in the wind. A gentle push on his head causes him to sway a half inch. His legs are filled with lead up to his knees to allow the movement. The sower and dome are mounted separately.

Two themes organize the art—the natural and human history of Nebraska as well as the evolution of western democracy. The first Greek art mosaic floor represents the earth, providing food and clothing. Next is human relationship, which gives us society. Above it all, is the spiritual, expressing noble purpose and virtue.

Two legislative chambers tell who we are. The east one presents the native people, and the west tells of immigrants. Both chambers have massive doors with the tree of life. Multicolored columns in the west chamber remind us of the diversity of immigrants, and three massive beams above represent the three nations that controlled this land. Gold leaf depicts the Spanish with lion and castle. The second has the French Kings fleur-de-lis and bumblebee, and the front displays the American eagle and shield. All are surrounded by a parade of explorers and pioneers.

Sculptures, part of the stone, surround the building with 21 portrayals of law/democracy, from Moses to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, including the Hebrew Deborah, Plato, the Magna Carta and the U.S. Constitution.

Our capitol was built the Nebraska way, pay as you go. That meant construction for ten years, beginning in 1922. The commissioners, in the Nebraska way, wanted to put art up for bid. Goodhue quickly nixed that. He had contracted for elite artists, the pick of the nation.

The mosaic artists rented warehouses in New York City (gasp!) in which to grind and fit the thousands of pieces of white Italian and black Belgian marble. They transferred the pieces to large sheets of brown paper and moved these to railroad flat beds.

The outside square of the capitol was built first, around the old capitol, which was then vacated and torn down to make way for the tower. Contractors left the west side open for railroad tracks coming to the edge of the rotunda to carry massive stones. Artists slid their mosaic sheets from the rail cars to the new floor.

It is fun watching fourth grade groups walk across those mosaics. The figures are classic Greek art, naked and, shall we say, strongly built. The girls giggle, but the boys keep peeking back over their shoulders to get another look.

Arches show activity that all cultures can share. In fact, a basic premise of the art is that all cultures share the same things. A sower from an ancient civilization, a pioneer on the prairie and the farm girl with a laptop can communicate with each other as we reflect on the messages surrounding us.

Our magnificent gift includes worldwide artists placing their work in a tower on faraway Nebraska plains. It is Greek, Roman, Egyptian and Nebraskan. Graceful figures of life and home.

Robust images of farm families. Muscular figures of business and industry, and topping the dome, not a prairie pioneer sowing seed, but an agricultural worker from an ancient civilization, with Egyptian headband, stating that agriculture connects the civilizations of the centuries. Their gift shouts out that we are challenged to build a better world.

You can tour the capitol on the Web at www.capitol.org. Assisting in this article were Robert Ripley, architect/administrator for the Capitol Commission, and Roxanne Smith, historian and interpreter of art for the Commission.