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Article Summary: The early twentieth century saw the creation of a central agency to deal with Omaha's physical growth and development. Although the planning commission had limited powers for many years, it provided a foundation for the more effective city planning department that emerged after World War II.

Cataloging Information:

Names: James Dahlman, Nathan Philip Dodge Jr, Charles L Saunders, Tom Dennison, B Kvenild, Edward Smith, Will Brown

City Planning Commission Members: George T Morton, George B Prinz, Everett Buckingham, Thomas A Fry, George Brandeis, J E George

Planning Experts: George B Ford, Ernest P Goodrich, Charles Mulford Robinson, Harland Bartholomew

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Photographs / Images: map showing proposed inner belt traffic way, 1919; Omaha riot, September 28-29, 1919

Early City Planning Efforts in Omaha, 1914-1920

By Janet R. Daly

The national city planning movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries aimed to remake the modern American city. To achieve the necessary political leverage to realize their goals, planners and their progressive reformer allies pushed for the establishment of a city planning commission, a central decision-making body charged with directing city growth and development. A favorite, early tool of these commissions was the comprehensive city plan, a single document outlining a vision of the "new city" these reforms sought. These plans, often grand in scale and calling for a massive physical restructuring of the city, seldom came to fruition. More often than not, after the initial ballyhoo they faded into obscurity.

Further pushing these plans into the background was the emergence of the newest and brightest star on the planning horizon, zoning. Thus, while planners and reformers began with the purpose of creating a comprehensive scheme, they rapidly channeled their energies away from the plan and toward zoning. In Omaha the crusade to create a city plan also suffered from a waning of the reform impulse, the intrusion of more pressing social and economic concerns arising during World War I and its aftermath, a decreasing interest in planning, and an ever-present lack of funds. These factors forced a narrowing of the planning focus, resulting in a limited proposal for improvements which fell short of the grand design first envisioned by reformers.

However, the significance of efforts to create a planning commission and to draft a city plan is lost in any narrow concentration upon its limitations as a municipal reform. To understand their positions within the broader focus of change, city planning and city plans must be viewed as an attempt at centralization of authority, a force increasingly dominant

after 1900 that tended toward a centralization of decision-making in municipal government and encouraged organization and integration upon a large scale.¹ The power to plan was granted to municipal governments. The local bureaucracy was expanded with the establishment of an agency to carry out the responsibilities brought with the new power. And an attempt was made to implement a comprehensive plan. The results were by no means successful, yet they did represent an early limited attempt at rationalization and centralization and, hence, deserve recognition as part of the general process which was transforming the American city.

During the last quarter of the 19th century industrialization and urbanization permanently transformed the United States from the land of the "happy yeoman" to the domain of the urban dweller. Such sweeping changes did not come, however, without problems. The newly emerging metropolitan-dominated nation soon found itself in the throes of social, economic, and political upheaval. Unprecedented issues such as traffic and congestion, sanitation and health, and housing demanded attention. The city planning movement rose in response to these urgent necessities. Its immediate concerns centered on the increasingly unhealthy and dangerous conditions existing in the new urban-industrial areas. At first, lay practitioners without professional training in city planning attempted to solve these problems.

Even before 1900 concerned reformers, alarmed by the appalling conditions within cities, began searching for answers. They focused their attention on the most obvious problems of traffic congestion, sanitation, health, and housing. One suggested solution called for an expanded transportation system to disperse the population into suburban areas. Another group felt that the answer lay in the development of public parks to break up the congestion. They followed the lead of landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead, who was responsible for the creation of New York's Central Park in 1857. By 1900 a large number of cities, including Omaha, had prepared park plans. The intent of a majority of these groups, however, was not social reform. They wanted to eliminate the ugliness of the industrial city, not create a social upheaval. Their concern was cosmetic; their goal, the creation of the City Beautiful. They dominated city planning until the early 20th century.²

As the focus of concern broadened from surface appearances, however, the necessity of trained experts became apparent. This, in turn, stimulated the professionalization of the planners and the modernization of their discipline. Whereas during the City Beautiful movement there was a preoccupation with beautification and grand scale designing, by 1909 planning energies directed themselves toward the creation of the "city efficient." This represented a broadening of the planner from a narrow focus on beautification to the idea of a city designed to operate on the principle of efficiency and functionalism in which the planner had an active interest in all aspects of city growth and development. Evolving concurrently with the National Progressive Movement, it was logical that these professional planning experts became allied with civic reformers and together they sought to come to grips with city life in the 20th century.³

The expertise of the newly trained professionals meshed with the basic attitudes of progressivism. The urban-based reformers who came to dominate the progressive movement of the early 20th century were appalled by the effects of rapid population growth and industrialization upon their cities. Expansion seemed out of control and threatened to destroy the sense of unity and community which they felt had existed before the disruptive changes of the late 19th century. The middle-class businessmen and professionals who came to dominate the reform movement advocated the use of municipal agencies, increasingly in combination with comprehensive planning, to restore a sense of cohesion and order.⁴ While they pined for a lost sense of simplicity, they embraced modern social science as a savior. Many different solutions were offered from the building of new, smaller communities on the fringes of large cities to the creation of specialized neighborhoods and districts within cities. Regardless of the plan adopted, the progressive reformers' emphasis upon science and scientific management and the planners' goals of efficiency and the elimination of waste—both of which demanded some mechanism for centralized decision-making—made these two groups immediately compatible. Therefore, in cities across the nation, including Omaha, the reformers invited professional planners to serve as experts in their campaign to rationalize and control urban growth and development.⁵

The campaign to establish local planning authorities dated from the first decade of the 20th century. Simultaneously in several metropolitan areas experienced, well-developed groups interested in civic beautification and reform recognized the need of providing some single, central administrative body to direct city planning efforts. This realization resulted in the establishment of the first city planning commissions. Hartford, Connecticut, claimed the honor of being the city to establish such an official body. In 1907 its parks department successfully petitioned the Legislature to amend the city charter to allow the creation of a board consisting of "the mayor, the city engineer, the president of the board of street commissioners and the board of park commissioners, a member of the board of aldermen, a member of the common council board, and two [private] citizens" to act as "a commission of the city plan."⁶

In Omaha interest in civic improvement dated back to the late 19th century with the establishment of a board of park commissioners and the partly successful drive to build a comprehensive park and boulevard system. By the second decade of the 20th century, influential groups came to the realization that a park and boulevard system was an inadequate solution to problems the city faced due to urbanization and industrialization. More extensive planning was deemed necessary. Inspired by the rhetoric of the emerging national planning movement, local leaders explored the possibilities of introducing these techniques to Omaha.

In 1914 the Civic League, a progressive-reform group, pressured Mayor James Dahlman into introducing an ordinance creating a city planning commission. Under Section 82 of the city charter, the mayor and city council were empowered to create any office or employ any officer they deemed in the best interest of the city. The bill envisioned a body that would have the power to hire expert planners of "national reputation" to design and publish an overall city plan.⁷ The measure passed, but as an article in a local newspaper revealed, it was a "hopeless action." The mayor and the council dutifully created the desired board but refused to fund it, and no members were appointed. The city argued that insufficient "loose funds" existed in the 1914 appropriations. They did offer to fund half of it out of the "slender emergency fund" if planning enthusiasts raised the other half

by subscription. No one accepted the challenge.⁸ Undaunted, commission sponsors intensified their efforts in the following year and succeeded in gaining the support of the Nebraska State Legislature.

In January, 1915, the Commercial Club added its influence and prestige to those fighting for a city planning commission. This organization, the forerunner to the modern Chamber of Commerce, was an influential force behind Progressive reforms in the city, including the adoption of the commission form of government and annexation legislation. While passage of the latter bill was still pending, in a meeting held on January 15, 1915, George T. Morton, a local real estate executive, was appointed to direct the efforts in behalf of a club-sponsored bill then before the Legislature which would require the municipal government to appoint a planning commission.⁹ Morton was likely to find a sympathetic ear with at least two of Omaha's five senators.¹⁰ Senators Nathan Philip Dodge Jr. and Charles L. Saunders were both well-educated lawyers and, significantly, real estate men who would probably recognize the advantages of central planning.¹¹

Omaha did not gain home rule during the Progressive era as so many other cities did; in fact, it did not receive it until 1956. The state Legislature, therefore, still exercised a great deal of control over the city. The actual political machinations and any ideological disputes surrounding the passage of this legislation are obscure.¹² From surviving state senate records it is clear that the bill, known as Senate File No. 94, passed quickly and with little apparent opposition from its first reading on January 20 until April 5, 1915, when the governor affixed his signature.¹³ It stirred little controversy during its colorless legislative history. Local newspapers gave it scant notice and no editorial comment.

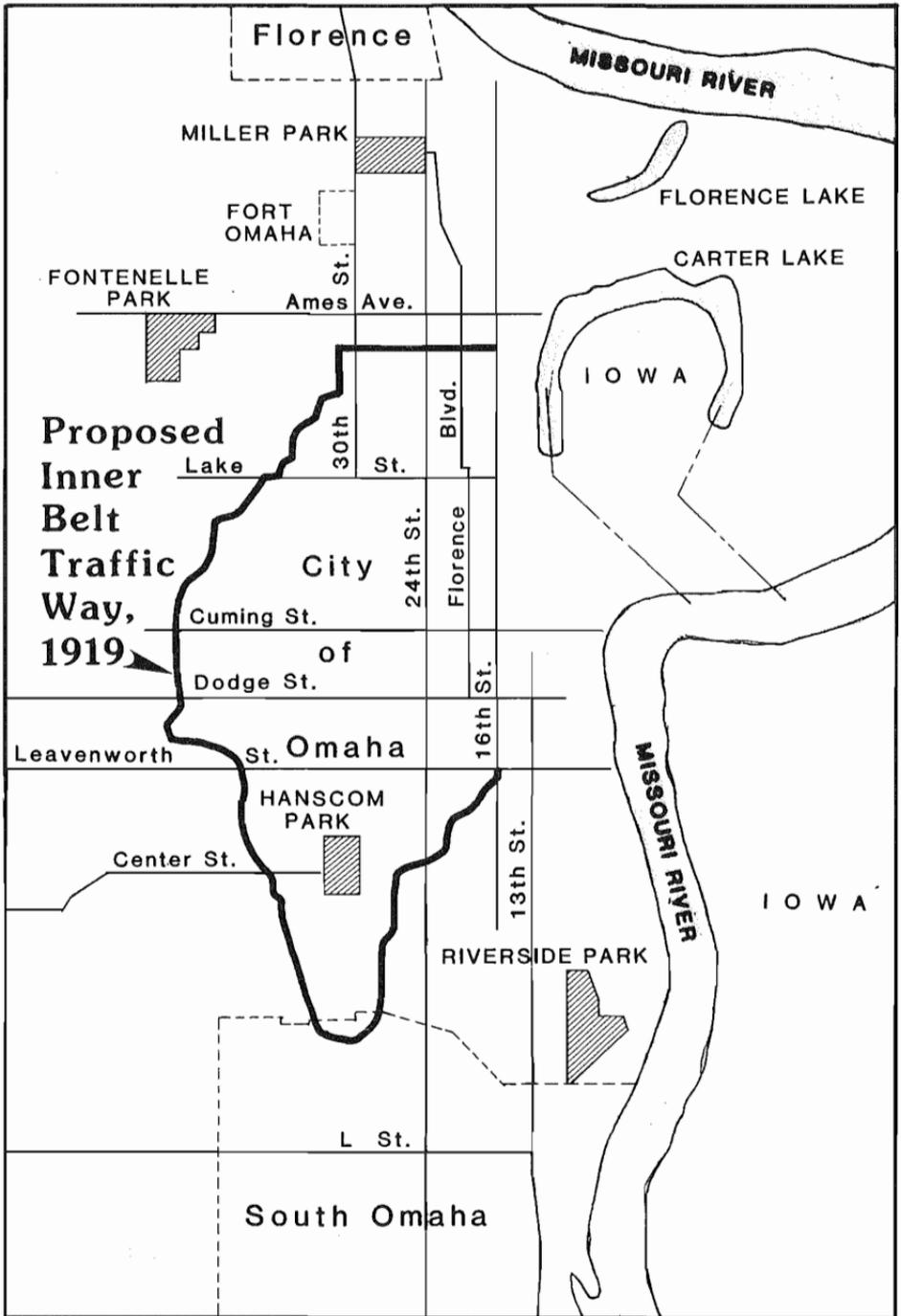
The available evidence does suggest a strong connection between real estate interests in Omaha and passage of the bill. The Commercial Club lobbyist, Morton, was a real estate executive, and two of the bill's five sponsors, Dodge and Saunders, were also involved in real estate development. In addition, it is not inconceivable that the bill passed because it appeared trivial in comparison to other weighty measures up for consideration. Controversial bills crowded the docket of the 1915 legislative session: annexation, the construction of warehouses for grain storage, division of the Douglas County

senatorial district into sub-units for the purpose of electing the five state senators (instead of the at-large system), the licensing of chiropractors, and resolutions concerning American neutrality and state funding of the National Guard.¹⁴ Against this line-up the rather innocuous commission bill may have passed with little attention.

It is also possible that the only real opposition came from the mayor and council, as evidenced by their actions in 1914. For all but a few years from 1901 until 1930, the political machine of Tom Dennison and Cowboy Mayor James Dahlman dominated the city. Potentially expensive reforms such as a planning commission would not appeal to the machine, which depended on frugality to retain the good will of the community's taxpayers. Perhaps city hall objected to the idea simply because it presented a financial burden. Another possibility: the main strength of the Dennison machine lay in the third ward, which consisted of the central business district and the surrounding working class residential area. Physical improvements in the city up to that time consisted primarily of parks and boulevards built on the outer fringes of the city near expensive residential areas. Possibly Dahlman and his council saw no political benefit for themselves in promoting planning as it offered little or nothing to the citizens living in their power base. Finally, any authority which operated at a city-wide level potentially threatened to undermine the influence of the machine which was based in only one area of the city.

Nonetheless, the mayor and council allowed the 1915 measure to pass without offering any substantial opposition, perhaps because, as the legislation was worded, any potential threat of such a central agency to the machine was limited. The law included no provisions requiring the city to fund the commission adequately. All actions of the commission were subject to the approval of the mayor and council, and the power of establishing and fixing building restrictions was vested not in the commission but with the city council.

Whatever the reasons behind its passage, the act required all cities of metropolitan size (read Omaha) to have a city planning commission. The body was empowered to "acquire or prepare a city plan" and to "carry out and maintain said plan after its adoption by the Mayor and Council." The legislation recognized, at least in theory, the perceived necessity of continuity between the creation and implementation of



plans. As outlined by the Legislature, the commission consisted of five members, each serving five year terms, except for the first appointees who were to have staggered terms of one, two, three, four, or five years, respectively. In that way one new member would be named each year. The commissioners served without pay. The city council, however, was required to provide them with office space in city hall.¹⁵

Omaha now had a single, central agency to direct and coordinate planning on a city-wide level. It is important to acknowledge, however, that it represented only an initial step in the direction of creating a centralized authority. Theory and practice did not meet and, thus, at this point the ideal was far from realized. As suggested previously, the powers outlined by Senate File No. 94 were not broad and, significantly, while planning proposals were initiated by the commission, all actions were subject to approval of the mayor and council. With the requisite approval the commission could acquire the land necessary to carry out planned improvements such as the enlargement to waterways, the extension or widening of streets and boulevards, additions to parks, playgrounds and parkways, and the construction of new public buildings. Any land acquired found in excess after completion of a project remained under the supervision of the commission, and it could place restrictions upon the future use of such areas in the interest of protecting the surrounding public works and improvements. Such powers were granted under the general obligation to protect the public health and welfare.¹⁶

As also noted, the commission was not given the power of establishing and fixing building restrictions, which instead was given to the mayor and council. Under the provisions of the law, the council could pass ordinances limiting, confining, excluding, and prohibiting the placement of businesses (factories, stores, or business houses) along any thoroughfare in the city. It also had the power to set property lines. Further, the restrictions could not be passed until a majority of the property owners affected submitted a petition to the council favoring the action. The planning commission could recommend that restrictions be appealed but only after a majority of the affected property owners agreed and all were awarded any damages.¹⁷ Clearly, while the creation of the commission was a significant step in the direction of centralized municipal

authority, it was a limited victory within narrowly defined parameters of action. It was, however, an important initial attempt and must be recognized as such.

In addition, the newly created commission was completely dependent upon the good will of the mayor and council for its operating funds. When the Legislature forced the city to create a park board in 1889, the law also included a provision for a special tax that the city was required to levy to fund the board's activities. For unknown reasons no such provision was included in Senate File No. 94. The absence of this feature, however, certainly minimized controversy and probably aided in the passage of the legislation. The Dahlman administration, which prided itself on frugality and had refused to fund the city-created commission in 1914, was not likely to be a major source of money. The omission proved significant in subsequent years as the commission frequently found itself without adequate funds.

No action was taken by the mayor and council from the April passage of the legislation until November 14, 1915, when the long-awaited announcement of the members of the new commission was made. Mayor Dahlman formally nominated George T. Morton (one-year term), George B. Prinz (two-year term), Everett Buckingham (three-year term), Thomas A. Fry (four-year term), and George Brandeis (five-year term).¹⁸ Dahlman could hardly have picked a group of men likely to be more pleasing to the business community than his five nominees. George T. Morton, as previously noted, was a local real estate broker and had headed the Commercial Club's lobbying efforts on behalf of Senate File No. 94. George Prinz was an architect known primarily for his work in the area of private residential dwellings, although he also designed the old Omaha Country Club and the distinctive Flatiron Hotel.¹⁹ Everett Buckingham was a vice-president of the Union Stockyards Company and was responsible for its general management. He was also associated with the Union Pacific Railroad and, thus, not surprisingly served the Commercial Club as chairman of its Committee of Railroad Extension and Improvement.²⁰ Thomas A. Fry was a wealthy local businessman, member of the school board, the Tornado Relief Commission of 1913, and the Commercial Club.²¹ The fifth member, George Brandeis, was a scion of the locally promi-

ment family which owned and operated one of the city's department stores.

The city planning commission opened its office on May 15, 1916, with a first year budget of \$7,500.²² The office itself was small; the main furnishings included only a conference table and two drafting boards. The budget did allow the hiring of staff members, B. Kvenild, an engineer who doubled as the commission's secretary, and one draftsman. George Morton was elected chairman, and in June, 1916, he and Kvenild attended the National Conference on City Planning in Cleveland, Ohio, to meet with the three planning consultants hired to design the city's comprehensive plan. All three men—George B. Ford, E. P. Goodrich, and Charles Mulford Robinson—were nationally recognized experts in their field.²³

George B. Ford was a central figure in the drive to transform city planning from a haphazard procedure concerned primarily with beautification to an exact science grounded in sound objective and technical methods. A Harvard graduate, Ford did post-baccalaureate study at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, where he became interested in the problems of multi-family housing. His philosophy of city planning was fully formed by 1912. At that time he articulated it in an address before the American Civic Association in which he defined the city as a functional unit and declared that the only worthwhile planning was that which took into consideration all the basic needs of urban life. Significantly, he wished to enlist the support of the business community in the planning process. Recognizing the Progressive reformer's preoccupation with scientific management, he emphasized the possibilities for efficiency inherent in a systematic application of scientific planning procedures. He knew where the power and money in a community lay, and he sought to tap that source to forward his goal.²⁴

Ernest P. Goodrich was Ford's partner in a planning firm known as the Technical Advisory Corporation. These two men worked together on plans for Newark and Jersey City. Goodrich, an engineer, was particularly expert in the field of transportation.²⁵ Charles Mulford Robinson was a central figure in promoting the "City Beautiful" movement—the name given to the initial stages of the planning movement in which the emphasis was on civic aesthetics and the elimination

of the ugliness of the industrial city. Although he was trained as a journalist, not an architect or engineer, Robinson became interested in the theories of civic improvement during the 1890s and soon began publishing articles on the subject in the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's Monthly*. His major contribution came with the publication in 1901 of his first book, *The Improvement of Towns and Cities*, subtitled "The Practical Basis of Civic Aesthetics." The work was immediately successful and became the "bible" for the movement.²⁶ Robinson was compatible with the more scientifically oriented Ford and Goodrich in that he also recognized the necessity of comprehensive planning.

With the office open and the experts hired, the city planning commission's first responsibility under the law was the creation and publication of a city plan. Upon their arrival in the city, Ford, Goodrich, and Robinson undertook a thorough and detailed study of conditions in Omaha. Despite the lack of funding and consequently small staff, Omaha's planning experts directed the preparation of 18 data maps which they hailed "the most practical and workman-like survey preliminary to a city plan ever made for an American city."²⁷ These graphic surveys detailed a number of important physical features of the city and together a fairly complete picture of conditions as they existed. The survey did not attempt to discover the historical background behind the existing features. Rather, its main thrust was to describe as accurately as possible Omaha in 1916-1917.

The philosophy behind this wide-ranging study was put forth in the introduction to the finished product. Here the trio of consulting engineers declared:

Few laymen realize the thoroughness with which the science of city planning is now taken up. This study, once entered upon in a light-hearted fashion, bases its recommendations today on investigations at once so comprehensive and detailed that no city is able to furnish from its records...the data which is desired. It is realized that the city of the future must so clearly grow out of the city of the present, that the first essential step is to know all the present conditions. Those conditions are not engineering feats alone. The time has gone when a city planner can be just a municipal engineer. He must be also an efficiency engineer and social scientist.²⁸

This statement suggests a philosophy of city planning far advanced from the "City Beautiful's" narrow focus on civic

beautification through park and boulevard systems. Surface beautification was only one small part of a much larger scheme. Here is demonstrated the optimistic belief that in understanding the present, man can plan a better future. In order to improve the city, the planner must understand the city in all its complexity. Further, reflecting the desire to place all city planning under a single, central authority, this statement suggested a belief that there was no clearly defined limit to the areas now falling under the proper and necessary purview of the city planner. In conducting their survey, Ford, Goodrich, and Robinson brought that philosophy to Omaha.

However, the bright promise of the optimistic philosophy represented in the broad foundation laid by the survey²⁹ was dimmed by a lack of funding. After careful consideration the commission asked the city council to appropriate \$25,000 for 1917, an increase of \$17,500 over the previous year's allotment. Commission members insisted that in order to continue progressing toward the development of a comprehensive plan such a substantial sum was necessary. When the final council appropriations failed by 60 percent to meet the recommended budget, the commission and its experts were forced to lower their expectations and narrow their focus.

Faced with an uncooperative city council and cognizant of the fact that public support was vitally necessary, the commission and the trio of consultants decided early in 1917 to concentrate their energies along three lines. Their first priority became the passage of legislation enabling the city to enact a comprehensive zoning ordinance. Secondly, work continued on proposals to extend, widen, and regrade traffic thoroughfares. Finally, reflecting the persistence of certain "City Beautiful" ideas, the construction of a scenic drive remained an important goal.³⁰ Zoning was first introduced on a citywide level in New York in 1916 and was rapidly gaining popularity as a planning tool. It, however, only remained the center of attention until April when, much to the chagrin of its supporters, the state Legislature did not enact enabling legislation. The bill passed the House, but the Senate rejected it in the hectic final days of the legislative session.³¹ Subsequently, on George Morton's recommendation, the planning commission decided to concentrate its efforts for the rest of the year on street improvements and the extension of the boulevard system.

Despite setbacks the efforts of 1917 were not entirely futile. Two important pieces of legislation did pass, both of which furthered the realization of the ideal of central planning. First, the city gained the power to plot adjacent territory within a three-mile radius of the city limits. Omaha was growing outward rapidly during this period by annexing both smaller neighboring towns and villages (South Omaha, Benson, Dundee) and outlying real estate developments. It was, thus, deemed important that the city's authority at least in the area of plotting lots and streets, expand to meet this growth.³² As a consequence of this legislation, the streets and building lots of outlying real estate developments were dove-tailed with those of the city in anticipation of any eventual merger. Second, the city acquired the right to grade intersecting streets in a given district after receiving a petition from a majority of affected residences and/or businesses. Omaha was a city of steep and rolling hills, running parallel to the river, which impeded westward expansion. The law made it far easier to initiate public improvements which would eliminate those impediments to growth.³³

The detailed survey, plus the legislation, laid the foundation for the "Preliminary Studies for a City Plan for Omaha," published by the city planning commission in November, 1917. The document told the tale of frustration on the part of the planners. What began in May, 1916, as a crusade inspired by dreams of civic greatness, became by late 1917 a much more realistic desire to at least improve intra-city transportation. The bulk of the suggestions included in the study dealt with street widenings and extensions. Ambitious, despite its narrow focus, it did include recommendations concerning almost every major thoroughfare in the city. Boulevards and drives received attention as did the belt line traffic way.³⁴ By 1917 the Missouri Pacific Railroad had constructed a belt line railroad extending north out of the central business district approximately 45 blocks to Ames Street, westward to the vicinity of 42nd Street, then in a southerly direction until it connected with rail lines surrounding the stockyards and packinghouses of South Omaha. Planners envisioned a traffic thoroughfare paralleling this belt line.

The study was exactly what its name suggested, a preliminary report. In their presentation to the city council,

the commission members acknowledged the tentative character of their suggestions. Pleading a lack of time and funds, they asked that the council approve the report, thus giving the commission the go-ahead to prepare a more detailed and complete plan. The council, probably realizing that an affirmative vote entailed no real obligation on its part to offer any more support or encouragement, approved the report by a vote of 7-0.³⁵

The year 1918 was one of inactivity and difficult transition. With the publication of the preliminary report, Ford and Goodrich completed their task and departed. Robinson had died earlier in the year, and the commission operated without its prestigious counsel. Work did continue on the zoning issue, already emerging as a rival to a city plan, but no knowledgeable expert guided the efforts. More importantly, the spring of 1918 witnessed a dramatic change in municipal government. The machine of Tom Dennison, for the first and only time in its 30-year existence, was defeated. Gaining control of city hall, the city's moralistic reformers led by Edward Smith took office pledging to clean up city government, especially the corrupt police force. That intrepid band of reformers directed its attention and energies toward the elimination of vice, graft, and corruption—not the improvement of streets, parks, and sewers. This administration sought to strengthen the moral fiber of the city, not its physical superstructure. Finally, the intervention of the United States in the war in Europe increasingly absorbed the imaginations of not only local reformers, but of all citizens at every social and economic level. The city plan, therefore, which already suffered from the waning enthusiasm of its early supporters, further slipped into obscurity, lost amidst the rush of more urgent matters. Only in the final month of the year did the commission take any positive action toward the completion of its primary responsibility. In a meeting held on December 4, 1918, Commissioner J. E. George (who replaced George Brandeis, after he resigned in November, 1916) suggested that the commission hire Harland Bartholomew, a young planning expert he had met on a recent trip to St. Louis and a former employee of Ford and Goodrich.

After a two-year stay at Rutgers University where he studied civil engineering, Bartholomew joined Ford and Goodrich in 1912 and represented them in Newark, New Jersey, when

their firm was contracted to prepare a comprehensive plan for that city. In 1916 St. Louis hired him as its new city planning engineer. There he had the opportunity to apply the lessons he had learned through the Newark experience. Within three years he designed a basic program for planning in St. Louis. At the same time he began to reach beyond that city's limits to join an increasing number of professionals who offered their services as consultants on a contractual basis. Eventually, in the fall of 1919, he replaced the late Charles Mulford Robinson as associate professor of civic design at the University of Illinois and from that base offered his services to cities across the nation.³⁶

Toward the end of his career Bartholomew stated, "My interest in city planning beginning with the Newark work was to produce for every city a true comprehensive plan.... This has seemed to me to be the basic essential in the field and my work was always oriented in that direction."³⁷ That orientation was evident in the first letter he sent to his new employers in Omaha. First, he outlined a four-year procedural program in which he listed the preliminary steps needed to prepare and to publish a comprehensive city plan. The program listed a number of necessary reports and projects, including the passage of a zoning ordinance, and anticipated completion of the comprehensive city plan in 1922.³⁸

In addition to the four-year procedural program, reflecting his strong belief in a single, central plan to direct future growth and development, the ambitious civic designer also included an outline for growth and development in Omaha from 1919 to 1950. There he laid out the basic issues and the proper methods pursuant to the success of long-range planning. The 10 point program covered issues ranging from the writing of a history of the city's physical growth and development to a publicity policy aimed at attracting widespread and enthusiastic support for the commission's efforts. In between, Bartholomew touched upon streets, transit, transportation, public recreation, zoning, civic art, legislation and finance, and the necessity of building a good working relationship with various power bases in the city, such as city officials, influential individuals, and public or semi-private organizations.³⁹

The program was impressive, but probably not realistic. Funding was the major obstacle in both short-run and long-

run terms. The commission was having problems winning sufficient appropriations to keep operating on a year-to-year basis. It was also highly unlikely that it could convince the budget-conscious municipal officials to commit themselves to such a prodigious and potentially expensive undertaking that would involve large appropriations every year for years to come. Secondly, generating public enthusiasm remained a problem; the planners needed something they could point to which would provide clear benefits immediately, thus winning the support of the community. The "pie in the sky" goals, therefore, had to be brought down to earth and placed within the realm of the possible.

By July, 1919, the commission and Bartholomew evidently realized that in order to be successful they had to think in less grandiose terms. In a report to the city council a fairly modest eight-point program was presented. The commission insisted that those projects were the most urgent and vital of all those considered. Further, the report declared that completion of all the projects was necessary for the success of any as they were highly interrelated. The commission called for the extension and widening of Harney, Douglas, 20th, 22nd, and 24th Streets, the completion and improvements of the inner belt traffic way, and construction of a scenic river drive.

As mentioned, only a few years earlier Omaha had begun the process of spatial growth by annexation. In 1915 South Omaha and Dundee were incorporated into the city. Two years later Benson, Florence, and the developments south and west adjacent to Dundee were added. Major east-west thoroughfares such as Douglas and Harney were needed to connect Omaha with its new western possessions of Benson, Dundee, and the adjacent developments. Florence to the north, and South Omaha could be made more readily accessible by the improvement of major north-south routes such as 20th, 22nd, and 24th Streets. Further, a significant industrial zone was developing along the northern sweep of the belt-line railway. The parallel traffic way was seen as a method to encourage that development and to aid similar projects along the entire route of the rail line. And, the idea of a scenic river drive had been bandied about for several years. Businessmen and civic beautifiers both wished to use the city's extensive riverfront to its best advantage. In 1919 the idea gained con-

siderable support when it was suggested that the river drive be designed as a unique, enormous war memorial. The route overlooking the majestic Missouri River was touted as a fitting tribute to the sacrifices and contributions of midwesterners to the war effort.

That proposal was a hardly recognizable descendant of the extensive street improvement program outlined in the preliminary study of 1917. In the earlier document nearly every major thoroughfare received some attention. The later report only dealt with a few of the important central city streets. It barely resembled the program outlined by Bartholomew a few months earlier as it did not promise to correct the severe traffic flow problems, only to ameliorate the most glaring difficulties. Money pressures and waning enthusiasm took their toll as the comprehensive plan envisioned by commission sponsors in 1915 became less and less comprehensive as it neared fruition. Once again, as with the case of the commission itself, the ideal was merely approached rather than realized. The city council took no action that summer, probably awaiting completion of a more formal report required before a bond issue to finance the schemes could be placed on the ballot.⁴⁰ The projects recommended in the report became the foundation for that document, transmitted to council on October 1, 1919, often referred to as Omaha's comprehensive plan.

Actually that proposal was not a comprehensive plan. By the standards set by Bartholomew in his early statements, the 41-page document fell short of approaching comprehensiveness. It was a detailed presentation of the eight-point program tentatively outlined the previous July, plus an improvement scheme for Center Street. More properly defined, it was a traffic and transportation plan with the addition of a beautification project, the proposed river drive, which also promised to improve traffic flow. While other projects received mention in passing, the report lacked any solid plans dealing with public recreation, civic art, community structures or zoning—all of which were included in the outline for a comprehensive plan originally submitted by Bartholomew.

The commission publication was exactly what its title—*City Planning Needs of Omaha*—suggested: a proposal dealing with the most urgent current needs. Further, it is doubtful

that the authors ever intended that it be viewed as anything more than that. In the letter of transmittal printed at the beginning of the report the commissioners revealed the limited purpose of the document:

We have the honor to submit herewith a report dealing with the several opening and widening projects recently approved by this Commission and recommended to your honorable body for approval. It is our hope that the necessary action will be taken to submit these projects for approval at the election in the spring of 1920 and at the same time ask that the city be permitted to issue bonds for its share of the cost of these several projects.⁴¹

Thus the commission had no illusions that its brief report represented a comprehensive plan. It viewed the document only as a necessary step toward the approval of a bond issue to finance the proposed improvements.

It was, however, the closest the commission came to creating a comprehensive plan. As such, it presented those projects that seemed the most urgent to at least a partial realization of the goals of the planners and the commission. Taken on its own merits, it was a carefully prepared and thoughtful proposal.

The proposed street widenings and extensions aimed at improving the traffic flow in the city, especially that radiating from the central business district. The report suggested that "unquestionably" the business district would expand westward from its contemporary boundary of 16th Street to the area around 24th Street. The street improvements, thus, were necessary to facilitate and secure that continued "natural" expansion.⁴² The plan also envisioned the construction of the inner belt traffic way. That project was compared with the famed "Loop" in Chicago and promised to enhance residential as well as industrial development along the belt way and consequently increase city tax revenues.⁴³ Furthermore, the commission recommended the widening and extension of Center Street; first, because it already existed as a major east-west thoroughfare and, secondly, because it would facilitate the continued development of the Ak-Sar-Ben exposition grounds and the U S Mail Aviation Field located along the western stretches of its route.⁴⁴ In addition, the report included the proposal for a scenic drive traversing nearly the entire length of the city along the Missouri River. The possibility of it serving as a war memorial was especially emphasized and as such it provided the major attention-getting, public rela-



The Omaha riot of September 28-29, 1919, deflected Omaha city planning and other reform efforts.

tions device. Second on the list of reasons that the drive should be constructed was the unabashed claim that it would create "an improvement for which Omaha may become world famous." Certainly the nation's largest and most unique war memorial would attract considerable attention.⁴⁵

In addition to the necessity of gaining favorable publicity, addressed by the proposed river drive, throughout the report the commissioners alluded to the problem of acquiring adequate funding. The descriptions of each of the projects contained statements assuring the council that the costs were necessary and minimal. Further, the planners repeatedly pointed out the fact that the improvements would result in increased property values and increased tax revenues.

The carefully worded report which strove to overcome the problems of funding and charisma, nonetheless, paled in the light of tense social problems in the city during the post-World War I period. The need for a rapid increase in manpower in war-related industries, such as meatpacking, brought blacks in sizable numbers into the city for the first time. Tensions produced by this social change erupted into violence in September and October of 1919. On Sunday, September 28, a mob out to avenge the alleged rape of a white girl by a black man converged on city hall determined to administer vigilante justice to the accused, Will Brown, and anyone who dared to stop them. Throughout the long, tension-filled day the mob became more bold and violent. At 11 p.m. Mayor Edward Smith appeared, determined to disperse the crowd, but for his efforts was "strung-up" though not killed. In the early morning hours of September 29, rioters stormed city hall, captured Brown and hanged him from a lamp, then dragged his beaten and burned body through the streets in an orgy of violence which lasted several hours. The city awoke on Monday morning to find its mayor critically injured, its new city hall burned, federal troops in charge, and a black man dead in the heat of unreasoned fear and anger.⁴⁶ It is not surprising that the document "City Planning Needs of Omaha" issued a few days later on October 1 received no notice at all. Further, the municipal government, which suffered heavily in the scandal-ridden aftermath of the riot, apparently had no time or interest for the report and consequently took no action upon it. Therefore, the bond issue did not appear on the April, 1920, ballot as originally planned by the commission.

After Omaha reformers had succeeded in 1915 in establishing a city planning commission, important local factors came into play which greatly influenced the course which city planning followed. First, it suffered from a chronic lack of operating capital. From the beginning the city council refused to appropriate adequate funds both for the expenses of the commission and the proposed projects. The Dahlman administration was severely criticized after an early spending spree on public improvement after 1907 left the city with a high rate of bonded indebtedness and an increased tax rate. These machine politicians, so dependent upon the good will of the small taxpayers, were not likely to burn their fingers twice.

Further, governmental bodies in Nebraska, whether at the state or local levels, have generally tended to be frugal, preferring a slow pay-as-you-go strategy over increased taxes or deficit spending. The Dahlman and Smith administrations proved no exceptions. Also, the moralistic reformers who controlled city hall from 1918 to 1921 were more interested in creating clean government than clean street and thus preferred spending money on eliminating vice and corruption. Moreover, Omaha was smaller than Chicago, Kansas City, New York, or Boston. It did not have an extremely large tax base upon which to build municipal financing. In many ways it represented an urban area with "big city" dreams faced by a "small town" reality.

In addition, city planning failed generally to excite the public imagination, in part a result of the circumstances of the times as well as characteristics inherent to planning. World War I, social changes, the scandal-ridden Smith administration, and the general waning of the reform impulse, all served to drain the proposed projects of any headline-grabbing potential. Thus, circumstances beyond the control and prediction of the commission stymied it at every turn.

Moreover, as one interpretation suggested, city planning during the Progressive Era was a profession in the service of an urban elite. Businessmen and civic reformers were often the forces behind planning commissions and generally filled their ranks. Economic rather than social concerns tended to dictate the programs. For example, improved trafficways in the central business district or main thoroughfares connecting the central areas with elite suburbs served primarily a small, well-to-do segment of the population. These urban elites who

created the planning commission to provide a mechanism for centralized direction of growth and development, did so to use it to bring to reality their vision of the ideal city. Hence designs emerging out of these commissions tended to reflect the interests and values of the business sector more than less influential sectors: the working poor, the new immigrants and blacks.⁴⁷

City planning in Omaha fit within that more general scheme. The Commercial Club was a major force behind the introduction of planning, and its members—businessmen and professionals—dominated the planning commission. One of the experts, George Ford, emphasized the desirable connection between the planning process and the business community. On the other hand, the machine, based on the support of less influential sectors of the community, did not try to stop planning, but once the mechanisms were in place it offered little support. First, as the state law which created the commission did not mandate its funding, it was an inexpensive concession to the business community, one which might bolster the image and position of the machine. Second, Dennison and Dahlman realized that their clientele in the third ward were more interested in the necessities of life—food, clothing and shelter. Wide boulevards and suburban parks did little to ameliorate the miserable living conditions in inner-city tenements. Thus the commission, its experts and its proposals, all reflected the interests, concerns, and values of a small, prosperous elite.

However, the significant factor pushing comprehensive plans into the background was the growing popularity of zoning. Zoning arose originally not as an alternative to the city plan, but as a complementary strategy of improving the urban environment. It was a more successful program, and eventually supplanted the city plan due to several factors. It was relatively inexpensive. A zoning map was superimposed upon the city, requiring no physical alteration, and applied to future rather than current land uses. More importantly, it offered a crucial benefit of a comprehensive plan, a city-wide design, with none of the attendant expenses. Moreover, zoning was far more flexible. Zoning laws offered variances, legal relief from provinces of zoning ordinances, which gave the measures a built-in mechanism for change and adaptation.

The physical improvements envisioned by plans were permanent and potentially unyielding. Further zoning literally hit

close to home for a wide spectrum of urban property owners as its provisions offered a measure of protection to residential areas from unwanted intrusions, thus bolstering property values.

Although the comprehensive plan never materialized, the projects and proposals made in preparation of a plan represented an important contribution to the future of the city. The various studies undertaken during that period did identify the basic structural needs of the city. Especially with the arrival of the automobile the improved transportation system outlined by planners became more than an economic convenience; it became a vital necessity. Many of the proposals, such as those dealing with east-west roadways, which failed as part of a package, were undertaken later, though in a piecemeal fashion, yet suggesting the soundness of the original ideas.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this era marked the creation of a central agency to deal with physical growth and development. Even though its powers were limited at first, no longer would growth be at the whim of the powerful individual or historical accident without any mechanism for response from the public sector. Now the private sector—business, commercial, industrial, residential—came under at least a minimum of enforceable central direction. While, at the local level, the planning receded into near obscurity during the 1920s and 1930s, its lessons and institutions were not forgotten. The planning commission survived the neglect, budget-cutting, and turnover of personnel in the more than 20 years following the efforts of 1914 to 1920 to emerge as the precedent and foundation for the city planning department created after World War II.

NOTES

1. Samuel P. Hays, "The Changing Political Structure of the City in Industrial America," *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (November, 1974), p. 16.

2. Thomas Adams, *Outline of Town and City Planning: A Review of Past Efforts and Modern Aims* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1935), p. 134; Roy Lubore, "Housing Reform and City Planning in Progressive America," in Kenneth J. Jackson and Stanley Schultz, editors, *Cities in American History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), p. 345.

3. Adams, p. 197; Roy Lubore, *The Urban Community: Housing and Planning in the Progressive Era* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), pp. 1-2; Robert A. Walker, *The Planning Function in Urban Government* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1941), pp. 5-6.

4. Zane L. Miller, *The Urbanization of Modern America: A Brief History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1973), pp. 123-124.

5. Howard P. Chudacoff, *The Evolution of American Urban Society* (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), p. 174.

6. Mel Scott, *American City Planning Since 1890* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), p. 80.

7. James F. Kelly, "City Planning in Omaha, 1914-1974" (Unpublished, typewritten manuscript), p. 1; B. F. Thomas, *Thomas' Revised Ordinances of the City of Omaha* (Omaha: Klopp and Bartlett Company, 1905), p. 38; City Council Minutes, January 6, 1914, Document #96.

8. *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, January 6, 1914, p. 1.

9. *Journal of the Commercial Club*, January 8, 1915; Omaha Real Estate Board, *Sixty-Five Years of Success; Omaha Real Estate Board* (Omaha: Omaha Real Estate Board, 1952), p. 5.

10. Nebraska was divided along county lines into 28 districts for the purpose of electing state senators. The districts consisted of from one to six counties. Omaha was in District 4, which included only Douglas County. According to the 1911 apportionment, District 4 was allowed five senators, elected at large. District 13 (Lancaster County, including the city of Lincoln) was allowed two senators. The other 26 districts were allowed one senator each.

11. Addison E. Sheldon, editor, *Nebraska Blue Book and Historical Register*, 1915 (Lincoln: State Journal Company, 1915), pp. 341-361.

12. Research of this issue was hampered by the lack of record keeping. The Nebraska State Legislature did not begin to keep minutes of its sessions, floor debates, or committee hearings until the adoption of the Unicameral in 1936. The only legislative records available before that time are the *Laws, Memorials and Resolutions* and the *Nebraska State Legislative Journal*. The former is merely a collection of legislation passed during a given session and the latter will only provide the researcher with a brief legislative history consisting of the dates of the first, second and third readings; the committee to which a bill was referred and the date it was reported back to the legislature; the date the president of that chamber signed it; and the date the governor affixed his signature. The Omaha City Council also did not keep extensive minutes of its meetings, debates, or public hearings. Again, only sketchy records of official actions and communication remain.

13. State of Nebraska, *Nebraska State Legislative Journal, Thirty-Fourth Session, 1915* (Lincoln: State Journal Company, 1915), pp. 162, 173, 246, 382, 722, 731.

14. See *Omaha Evening World-Herald*, January 15, 1915 to February 25, 1915.

15. State of Nebraska, *Laws, Memorials and Resolutions passed in the Thirty-Fourth Session of the Nebraska State Legislature* (York, Nebraska: York Blank Book Company, 1915), p. 477.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 477-478.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 478-479.

18. City Council Minutes, November 4, 1915, Document #5246.

19. Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission, "A Comprehensive Program for Historic Preservation in Omaha" (Omaha City Planning Department: Klopp Printing Company, 1980), p. 90.

20. Alfred Sorenson, *The Story of Omaha from Pioneer Days to the Present Time* (Omaha: National Printing Company, 1923), p. 609; *Journal of the Commercial Club*, February 2, 1915.

21. Sara M. Baldwin, *Who's Who in Omaha, 1928* (Omaha: Robert M. Baldwin, Publisher, 1928), p. 75.

22. Omaha City Planning Commission, "Preliminary Studies for a City Plan for Omaha" (Omaha: City Planning Commission, 1917), p. 11; City Council Minutes, January 7, 1916, Document #161.

23. "Preliminary Studies," pp. 11, 13.

24. Scott, pp. 120-122.

25. Kelly, p. 5; Scott, p. 122.

26. Jon A. Peterson, "The City Beautiful Movement: Forgotten Origins and Lost Meanings," *Journal of Urban History*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (August, 1976), pp. 426-428.

27. "Preliminary Studies," p. 13.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-19. The subjects covered in the survey included: use of land; the location of the working population; the distribution of the population; the location of areas where dwellings were crowded or unsanitary; existing and proposed sewers; parks, playgrounds, and school property; location of the school-age population; places where foodstuffs were sold; a transit map; contours and street gradients; trucking and automobiles; possible connections between dead ends of streets and possible widenings; railroad property and location and character of railroad street crossings; the distribution of property lines; street lighting maps; and public and semi-public buildings.

30. Planning Commission Minutes, December 15, 1916.

31. *Ibid.*, April 27, 1917.

32. The theoretical framework for this discussion is drawn from John Friedman, "Cities in Social Transformation," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 4 (1961), pp. 86-103.

33. "Preliminary Studies," pp. 13-14, 21; State of Nebraska, *Laws, 1917*, pp. 225, 493-495.

34. "Preliminary Studies," pp. 23-85.

35. City Council Minutes, November 30, 1917, Document #7187.

36. Norm J. Johnston, "Harland Bartholomew: Precedent for the Profes-

sion," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, Vol. 39 (March 1973), pp. 115-119.

37. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 121.

38. Planning Commission Minutes, April 2, 1919. The four-year procedural program presented the following outline for action: 1919, an inner belt traffic way report, a river drive report, a major street plan report, zoning studies, a preliminary report on zoning, the undertaking of the Dodge Street grading and the Harney Street widening projects, and the opening of the inner belt traffic way; 1920, a legislative and financial report, the passage of a zoning ordinance, a recreation report, and the grading of Douglas and Harney Streets; 1921, reports on transit, transportation, and civic art, and the widening of main streets running north, south, and west out of the central business district; 1922, a comprehensive plan.

39. *Ibid.*

40. Under state law any public improvement costing more than \$100,000 had to be approved in a general election before bonds could be issued.

41. City Planning Commission, "City Planning Needs of Omaha" (Omaha: City Planning Commission, 1919), p. 5.

42. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 24-29.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 29-32.

45. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-36, 40.

46. Arthur V. Age, "The Omaha Riot of 1919," MA Thesis, Creighton University, 1964, pp. 44-59.

47. Joseph Arnold, "City Planning in America," in Raymond A. Mohl and James F. Richardson, editors, *The Urban Experience: Themes in American History* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 24-31.