

Uriah and Mary E. Epperson

Philanthropists

Uriah (1861-1927); Mary (1855-1939)

by Daniel Coleman

Uriah S. Epperson was a businessman with a weakness for song and dance, and he is remembered today for having employed his considerable talents to organize productions, concerts, and social events for charity. When he died, his wife Mary carried on his enthusiasm for Kansas City's cultural life, nurturing her own interests in the arts and becoming one of the city's greatest benefactors.

Uriah Spray Epperson was born December 22, 1861, near Indianapolis, Indiana, son of William and Rachel Hawkins Epperson. His family moved to Kansas City when Uriah was six, and he was an early product of Kansas City's public school system. At 19 he went to work for the Fowler Meat Packing Company, rising to the position of plant general manager during his 22-year career there.

When his company was absorbed by another and new management required him to relocate, Epperson chose to remain in Kansas City, establishing himself as an underwriter of fire insurance for grain elevators and lumberyards. In addition to the U. S. Epperson Underwriting Company, he created the Epperson Land Investment Company.

A business and civic leader, Epperson served a term as president of the Kansas City Commercial Club, forerunner of the Chamber of Commerce. He was also instrumental in the creation of Kansas City's first Convention Hall, which was located at 13th and Central. Thanks in part to Epperson's energetic leadership, this building was rebuilt in just 90 days—in time for the Democratic National Convention to be held there as planned—after a devastating fire in 1900.

It is Epperson's creative side, however, for which he is largely remembered. A talented painter who never gave himself time to pursue this interest, he did indulge a contagious fondness for music. At the urging of his friend, *The Kansas City Star* publisher William Rockhill Nelson, in 1899 Epperson organized several hundred Kansas City businessmen under the banner of "Epperson's



Megaphone Minstrels" to raise money for improvements to Kansas City parks. The group donned costumes, played various instruments, marched and joked in a series of performances over several years. Epperson also served as director of the Kansas City Fall Festival Association, better known as the Priests of Pallas, whose annual parade and masked ball of the early 1900s became a social and cultural phenomenon in Kansas City.

It was said that the romance between Epperson and his constant companion at such events began upon their first meeting as young people. Mrs. Epperson was born Mary Elizabeth Weaver on a farm near Cooperstown, New York. The daughter of a veterinarian who moved his family to Kansas City when Mary was a child, she later graduated from St. Theresa's Academy. After her husband's death at age 66 on June 3, 1927, Mary Epperson spent the rest of her life giving generously in his memory to various arts organizations.

Among her favorite recipients was the Kansas City Philharmonic Orchestra, for which she endowed a music library. A major gift to the Kansas City Art Institute created an exhibit gallery and auditorium, and her donation of a \$50,000 home at 4446 Oak provided space for a number of studios and classrooms. To the Kansas City Conservatory of Music (now part of the University of Missouri-Kansas City), she made gifts of money for instruments and music, and when she died at age 84 on October 22, 1939, the Eppersons' enormous home at 5200 Cherry was willed to the university. This Tudor-Gothic mansion, originally designed with a pipe organ and orchestra balcony, has served various uses and currently is home to UMKC's Department of Architecture, Urban Planning and Design.

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