

# HISTORY IN PLACE

*The restoration of an iconic historic bridge in Wichita, Kansas, is a reminder that the city's old bungalow neighborhoods remain vibrant elements of one of America's most livable cities.*

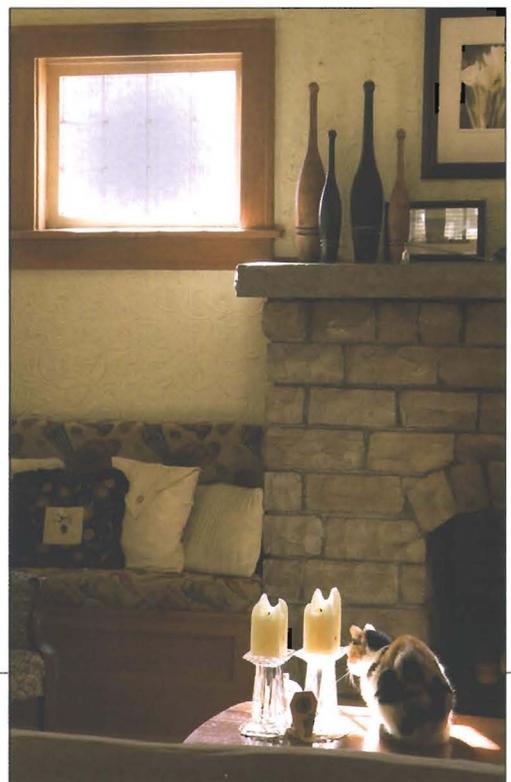
BY KATHY L. MORGAN

**M**OST OF US CONDUCT our day-to-day lives without giving much thought to the origins of the places we inhabit. Life is too full of activity and obligation for us to stop and question how the town or city we live in today was created out of nothing—or at least nothing we would find familiar—so many years ago.

Once in a while, though, some seemingly ordinary civic undertaking, because it involves an old structure or a notable historical event, catches a community's attention, then its imagination—and a glimmer of the past comes into view.

Something like that happened in Wichita in October, 2007. That month, work began on the long-planned renovation of the historic Minisa Bridge, an ornamental 250-foot span built in 1932 to connect the central business district with the tree-shaded parks and bungalow neighborhoods that had been developed over the previous two decades between the diminutive Little Arkansas River and its bigger sister, the Arkansas, or “Big Arkansas,” a couple of miles or so farther west. (Pronunciation note: in Kansas, the rivers' names sound like the state's: ar-KANS-as.)

Over the next three-quarters of a century, Minisa Bridge became a totem for the Riverside and North Riverside bungalow neighborhoods, both to their residents and to commuters passing through to and from later and larger residential developments farther west. Its renovation became an occasion for the residents



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEXANDER VERTIKOFF EXCEPT WHERE NOTED



PARSONS BRINCKERHOFF - WICHITA





to renew their connections with a relatively recent past that some of them could even remember, and also to the middle and later years of the 19th century, when Wichita arose on the Kansas prairie.

### Defining Visions

As a professional historic preservation planner for more than 30 years, and in Wichita for the last 10, it has been a big part of my job to think about the origins of places, especially American ones, and about the people who made them what they are.

I have lived in several American cities during my career, and although the specifics of history, geography and climate have dif-

fered for each one, there has always been one underlying theme defining their formation and growth: the vision and determination on the part of civic founders to create legacies—and, of course, this being America, build fortunes in the process. The buildings they raised—large and small, public and private, residential and commercial—were the working out of these visions even as they became the infrastructure of the lives we live, in and around them, today.

Located at the confluence of the Big and Little Arkansas Rivers in south-central Kansas, Wichita had been a trading center and meeting place for nomadic hunt-

ing peoples for at least 11,000 years when Spanish explorers and missionaries arrived in the area in 1541. Over the succeeding century and a half, Spanish then French explorers and trappers moved into the territory, coexisting as traders with the native peoples.



WICHITA-SEDOGWICK COUNTY HISTORICAL MUSEUM



THE DARIUS MUNGER HOUSE IS CONSIDERED TO BE WICHITA'S FIRST PRIVATE RESIDENCE.

By the turn of the 19th century, what is today Kansas was part of the French *Louisiane* territory that the U.S., under President Thomas Jefferson, purchased from France in 1803. The Louisiana Purchase prompted Jefferson to commission the Lewis and

Clark expedition, which accelerated the westward expansion of the North American frontier that had begun in earnest soon after the Revolutionary War.

The trickle of American settlers that had begun moving into the Kansas and Oklahoma territories

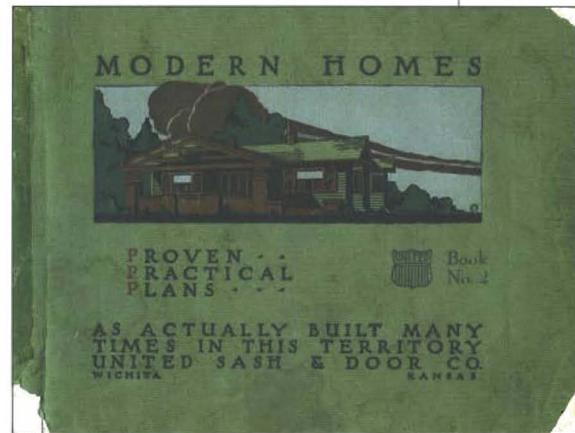
to establish farmlands in the middle 1800s became a torrent in 1862, when the Homestead Act opened the Prairie West to rapid settlement. After the indigenous Wichita people were removed to Indian Territory in 1867, the visionaries went to work.





Among the men who set down roots and started businesses along the Arkansas River were James R. Mead, Jesse Chisholm, William Greiffenstein and Darius Mung-er—men who had built lucrative trading enterprises with the Wichita and other tribes. By the time white settlers began pouring into the area, Mead, Chisholm, Greiffenstein and Mung-er had the economic capital to shape the development of the fledgling city and led the campaign to incorporate in 1870.

The railroad arrived two years later, making Wichita the destination for Texas cattle being driven north along the Chisholm Trail for shipment by rail to eastern markets. Soon Kansas wheat was being shipped along with the cattle, and by 1900 three major rail lines passed through the city.



SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AND UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES,  
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### The Bungalow Era

Alton Smith, a 26-year-old Ohio residential-development entrepreneur looking for opportunities in the growing cities of the western states, arrived in Wichita in the mid-1890s. After marrying a daughter of the city's co-founder, he moved on to the West Coast





before returning to Wichita in 1908 to establish the California Bungalow Company. It isn't known whether Smith was the first builder-developer to introduce the bungalow to Wichita, but his name was certainly one of those most prominently associated with the development of the city's upscale bungalow neighborhoods.

During his early years, Smith concentrated his efforts in the Riverside neighborhood, leading the development of that rich enclave of bungalows before and after the first World War. He also was building in the College Hill neighborhood east of downtown, which remains a prime upscale community to this day.

As it did all over the nation, the postwar real-estate boom of the 1920s spurred the growth of single-family housing in Wichita during the era in which the bungalow became the de facto "American home." Street after street in all of Wichita's new neighborhoods filled up with pattern-book Craftsman-style houses averaging five or six rooms. The clapboard-sided and brick-veneered houses varied in their interpretation of piers and porch trim, but their developers maintained similar setback, height, size and spatial relationships, establishing a continuity that came to be associated with comfortable, family-friendly environments.

Although the Great Depression of the 1930s ended the boom, Alton Smith remained a real-estate developer of consequence in Wichita until his death in 1940, and the Craftsman-style bungalow became an established and enduring residential feature of the city.





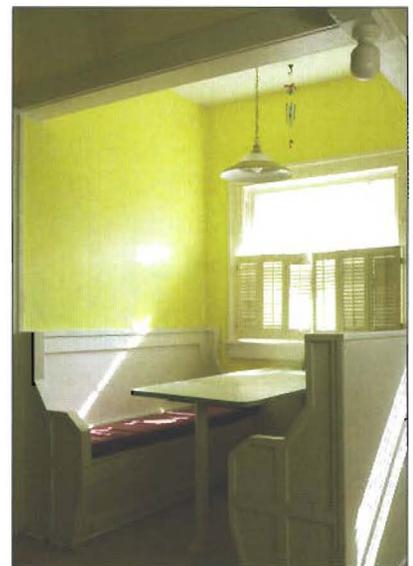
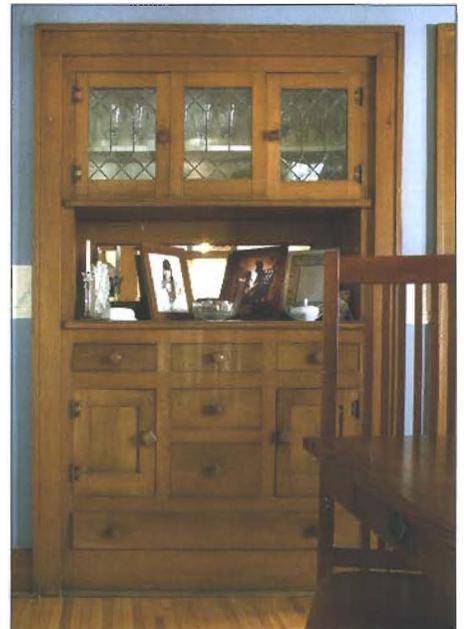
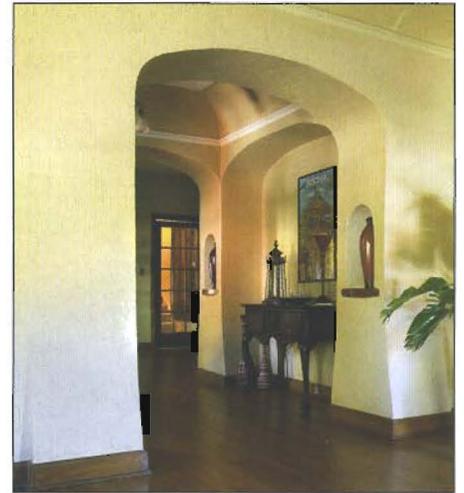


### Enduring Value of Place

Today, bungalows in a variety of styles still fill most of Wichita's early-20th-century neighborhoods, thanks largely to the endurance of their appeal to home-owning families looking for livable, affordable homes in pleasant neighborhoods near public transportation. The teardown phenomenon that has disfigured older residential areas in many American cities and towns has not come to Wichita. Even in the past two years, when

home prices and sales plummeted elsewhere in the nation, the value of existing Wichita homes held steady, and the inventory of homes for sale remained low.

It is significant that these neighborhoods have remained not only viable but desirable on their innate merits, without needing official preservation declarations or other protection. In large part, that may be ascribed to the spirit of Wichita as a place, which may also account for its appearance on





several lists of “most livable” U.S. cities in recent years.

Still, a vibrant and long-standing spirit of preservation has also contributed to the enduring appeal of Wichita’s residential neighborhoods. The city’s first documented preservation effort was directed at the Darius Munger House, built in 1869 and considered by most scholars to be the city’s first residence. (See photo, page 32.) In 1943, when it was threatened with demolition, the Eunice Sterling Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolu-

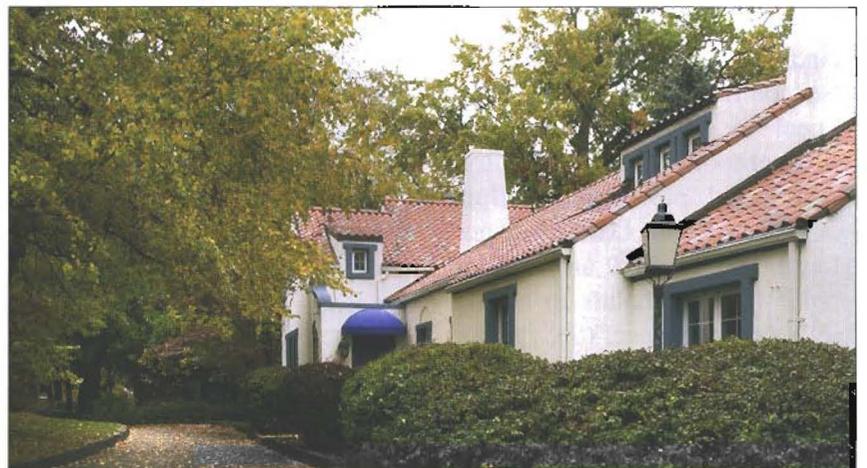
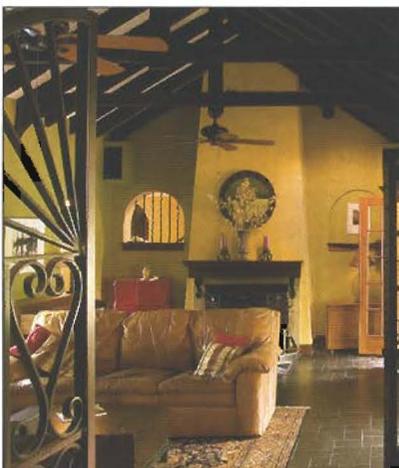




lion purchased it with the intent to restore it.

In 1950, Historic Wichita, Inc., was chartered for the sole purpose of restoring and preserving early city landmarks. The group was able to get a 99-year lease on 25 acres of land, and after the Munger House was deeded to the group by the DAR, it was one of five buildings moved to the site, dubbed "Cowtown," in 1952. Over the years, additional structures were saved from demolition and relocated to what is now the Old Cowtown Museum.

Historic Wichita changed over the years as its members realized that not just individual landmarks but portions of many neighborhoods needed protection. After much research by board members and with assistance from the National Trust for Historic Preser-



vation, Historic Wichita drafted a preservation ordinance that was approved in April 1975.

In 1978, three historic bungalow-rich districts were established in the Riverside and Midtown neighborhoods. Since then, the city has established eight National Register Historic Districts with more than 450 buildings, including 90 individually listed in the Kansas and National Registers and 23 listed locally. In addition, some 10,000 residential and commercial structures have been surveyed.

Over the past three years, the Wichita Office of Historic Preservation has compiled data on hundreds of bungalows and amassed a wealth of information on the contractors, architects and developers who, more than 80 years ago,



were going about the business of providing homes for the families of Wichita—homes that continue to shape our daily existence because they are the places where we live. 

*Kathy L. Morgan is Senior Planner in the Wichita Office of Historic Preservation.*



# An Icon Reborn

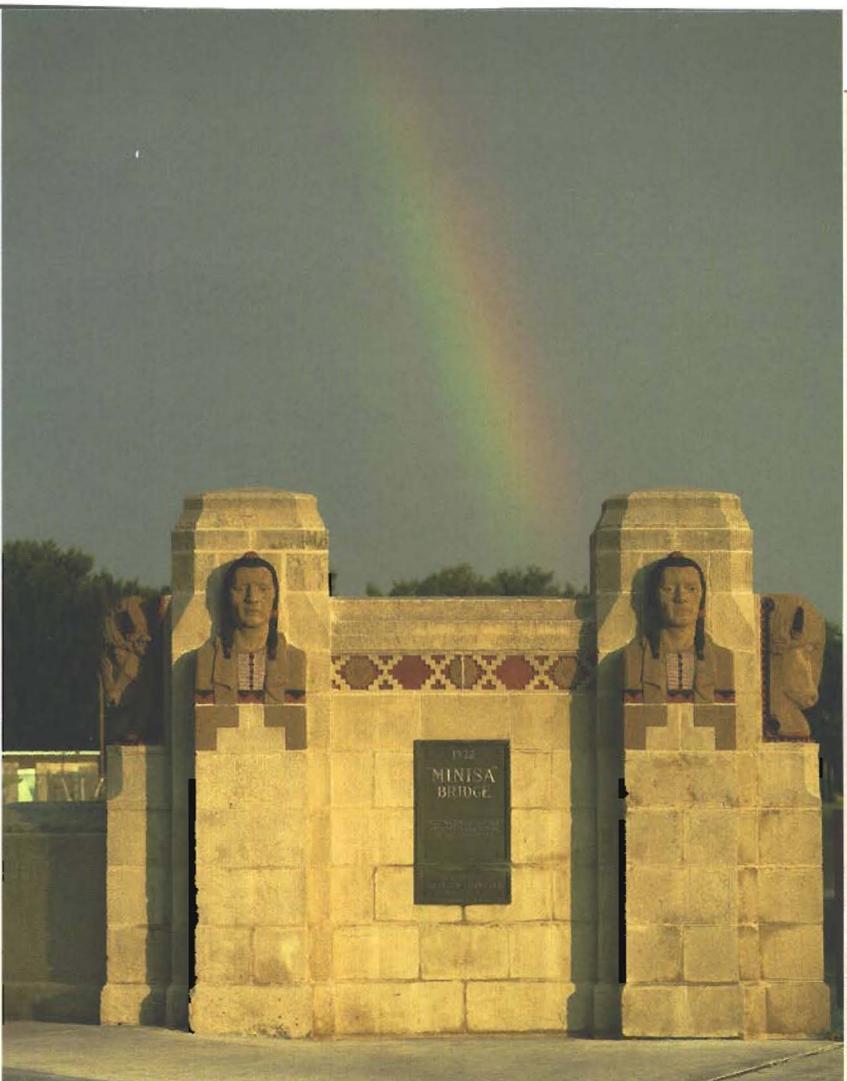
BARBARA R. HAMMOND

Under a clear, blue late-afternoon Kansas sky last September 23, the renovated Minisa Bridge, a historic 250-foot span over the Little Arkansas River between Wichita's central business district and the tree-shaded 1920s Riverside and North Riverside bungalow neighborhoods in the city's western residential areas, was rededicated after a yearlong renovation.

The bridge, built in 1932, was designed by noted Wichita architect Glen H. Thomas, whose 1929 Art Deco North High School rises nearby on the river's east bank. Wanting to embellish the structure with something distinctive, Thomas elected to decorate the brick-and-stone parapets with high-relief colored sculptures of a Native American man and a bison, similar to the figures with which he had adorned the high school.

Rather than use the glazed terracotta that he used on the school, however, for the more humble bridge he employed a far less expensive material—the colored cast concrete known as Carthalite that appears to have been unique to Wichita in the early decades of the 20th century.

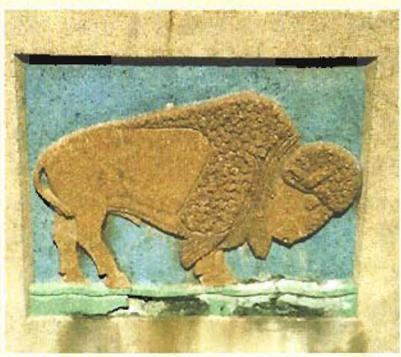
By 2004, it had become evident that the stress of some 17,000 vehicles traversing the 72-year-old structure each day was taking a toll. It was equally clear that tearing the bridge down and replacing it was out of the question. Its colorful design, employing icons of the state's and the city's cultural heritage, had become beloved element of the community's identity. Instead, a plan was devised to stabilize the parapets, remove the original brick paving stones, replace the decaying substructure with a new one, put the original paving stones back in place, and then restore Thomas's cracked and weather-worn Carthalite sculptures.



PARSONS-BRINCKERHOFF WICHITA

To celebrate the project's completion, more than 200 local residents, including the children of Gilbert Burgerhoff, the North High student body spokesman who participated in the original 1932 dedication, assembled on the bridge at sunset for a public rededication ceremony.

Many of the Riverside-area residents in attendance had parents or grandparents who had lived in the area when the bridge was built. Like their forebears, they had contributed colorful vintage glass objects, retrieved from their basements and attics, to the restoration effort, to be ground into the sparkling fragments and powders that have given the restored Carthalite much of its original luster. 



WICHITA HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE

*Barbara R. Hammond is Associate Planner in the Wichita Office of Historic Preservation. Her article "Carthalite—Wichita's Beautiful Concrete" appeared in AB No. 55 (Fall 2007).*