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Labeled largest stack in town

(Editor's note: This is the 29th in a series of "then and now" articles on places and things of interest in Kansas City, Kan., compiled by area historian Margaret Landis in observance of the 100th birthday of KCK in 1986. Much of the information has appeared in past editions of The Kansan.)



The brick smoke stack, 21st and Metropolitan, was built in 1900 and razed in 1958. The photo is taken from a post card from the files of Joseph Firestone, Kansas City, Kan.

(Transcriptions are presented without changes except to improve readability.)

When it was built it was called the largest brick smoke stack in the United States.

It was 187 1/2 feet tall, 26 feet square at its base and 15 feet across at the top. It contained 700,000 bricks and cost \$20,000 to build.

Oldtimers will readily identify the structure, no longer on the scene, as being located in the Argentine District of Kansas City, Kan.

The brick smoke stack was built by the Consolidated Kansas City Smelting and Refining Company at the "turn of the century."

Every town or city has derived its name from its geographical location or description, for an early settler, or for some industry in the area. "Argent," meaning silver, became Argentine and "Silver City" from the silver refining process at the smelter.

The Kansas City Smelting and Refining Company began operations in 1880 in Argentine. At that time it was described as being "four miles from Union Depot." Its business was refining ores: Zinc, pig lead and bullions -- gold and silver. The ores originated in Mexico and Colorado.

Fire destroyed most of the works on Dec. 2, 1886. The works were rebuilt immediately. The capacity was increased from four to seven smelting and two refining furnaces.

On Jan. 1, 1887 it was consolidated with the Mexican Ore Company of El Paso, Texas, becoming the Consolidated Kansas City Smelting and Refining Company.

The establishment throughout was illuminated by electric light; the company owned its own plant. At one time the smelter employed 1,200 hands and was the largest concern of its kind in the country.

Smoke Stack

A new smoke stack was built (about 1900) on the north side of Metropolitan near 21st Street, replacing the one on a hill to the south. Printed on a post card displaying the smoke stack: "Height 187 1/2 ft., Base 26 ft. square, 15 ft. across at top. contains 700,000 bricks and Cost \$20,000.00 to build."

The stack was built tall to carry the fumes to the currents of air above the hills.

Smelter Closed

The smelter operated for about 20 years. Several reasons have been given for the closing: It was cheaper to ship Mexican ore to the East by water than by rail to Argentine; new smelters were built nearer the mines in Colorado; a decrease in the demand for silver and the demonetization of the silver money.

"Free Silver" was a campaign issue in the Presidential election of 1896. The smelter closed October 1901.

Kansas City Structural Steel Company

The Kansas City Structural Steel Company was incorporated in 1907 and purchased the Argentine smelter for a structural steel plant.

A Landmark in Argentine

In the building of the steel plant, no use for the giant smoke stack could be found anywhere.

There were offers to give it to any one if they would tear it down. After inspecting it and figuring the cost, the offers were declined. The cost of razing the stack would exceed the salvage value.

So, the smoke stack stood as a landmark for 48 years or more until it was razed in 1959 for a \$2 million storm sewer project.

The Remnant

"Silver City" is still synonymous with Argentine. "Silver" is still the name of one of the streets.

A facet of The Stained Glass Windows in the new Municipal Building (city hall) is a visual reminder of the smoke stack. The window pictures the smoke stack and the chemical abbreviations of ZN and AU (zinc and gold).