

KANSAS STATE FAIRGROUNDS HOUSE OF CAPPER



HISTORY

The House of Capper is a covered veranda on the Kansas State Fairgrounds. Its building date of 1913 makes it one of the oldest existing buildings on the fairgrounds. It has formerly been used as a shaded place to rest, the Professional Arts Building, and even a bandstand at one time. Rich history embodies this facility, as it served multiple purposes on the fairgrounds throughout the years including host to the launch of multiple political candidacy announcements. The facility is named after Arthur Capper, former United States Senator and Governor of Kansas.

Arthur Capper was born at Garnett, Kansas on July 14, 1865. His parents, of the Quaker faith, were among the first settlers of Anderson County. At fourteen, Capper began his newspaper career as a “devil” in the office of the Garnett Journal earning one dollar per week. After serving his apprenticeship and becoming a real printer, he was paid eight dollars per week. In 1884, Capper moved to Topeka and was hired as a compositor on the Topeka Capital. He soon became a reporter and was sent east as the Washington correspondent. In 1893 he returned to Topeka and purchased the North Topeka Mail and shortly thereafter, the Topeka Breeze. When the Bank of Topeka found itself the owner of the Topeka Capital, Capper was persuaded to purchase and reform that paper. He later added the Missouri Valley Farmer, Capper’s Weekly, Nebraska Farm Journal, Missouri Ruralist, the Household and the Oklahoma Farmer to his corporate holdings. By 1931 his publishing business was the third largest in the United States and one of Capper’s publications, Household Magazine, had 1,775,000 subscribers.

Capper became active in Republican politics and ran for governor in 1912. His campaign was unsuccessful and he lost the race by just twenty-nine votes. Election reform measures were instituted during the next two years and Capper’s next campaign for governor was successful. He was the first native Kansan to be elected to that office.

Capper was a party man who stood for progressivism. At the opening of his second term as governor, Capper announced a program of progressive measures intended to make government simpler, more effective and less expensive. He revamped the budget system of state appropriations, consolidated boards and commissions giving them more responsibility, instituted the city manager system and removed numerous county government offices. He also fought for pensions for mothers and developed a child hygiene department. True to his Quaker antecedents, he was active in various peace movements and for prohibition. Capper was a booster for good roads, helped put through legislation for workmen’s compensation and fought for a minimum wage and shorter working hours for women. After serving two terms as governor, Capper was elected to the office of United States Senator and served several terms in Washington.

After the 1915 fair ended, the Topeka newspaper reported that Governor Arthur Capper had just returned from the fair and that he felt it was the biggest and most successful fair ever held in Hutchinson. Over 25,000 persons and 1,000 autos had been there on one big day. He described the concrete walkways as giving the appearance of a midway or pike and suggested that they be extended. Capper also hoped that there were no ill feelings between Hutchinson and the state capital.

The new House of Capper was completed for the 1916 fair. The open veranda provided a place to rest and enjoy a cool drink of water, rocking chairs in the shade and restrooms. The public was also provided with free copies of Capper’s publications. It is interesting to note that Capper provided a similar building, now demolished, for the fairgrounds in Topeka. The construction of this building may have been a strategy to create a more positive identity in the voter’s mind at election time.

Over the years, the House of Capper continued as an integral part of the fairgrounds. The building no longer served as a continuing advertisement for Capper but was used for many years as a bandstand and to display artwork. In 2007 the Kansas Fairgrounds Foundation renovated the historical house of Capper back to its original use. Fairgoers enjoy the House of Capper as a place to sit, rest and conduct some good ole people watching.