Today history repeats itself.

The mighty Missouri river, the longest in the world, draining one fifth of the continental area of the United States, again becomes a great artery of commerce – the evangel of a new era.

A little more than a century ago it carried Lewis and Clark into unknown lands. Chouteau, the fur trader, braved its waters in his canoe and began Kansas City.

Here at this mighty bend in its course, after sweeping westward four hundred miles, this powerful stream swings northward to the Dakotas and on to its source in the melting snows of the Rookies.

Volumes could be written about the part the Missouri River, and particularly this mighty bend at our door, has played in the march of civilization westward. Here the forty-niners disembarked for their great trek to California – here began the Oregon and the Santa Fe trails. Steamboat days are truly rich in pioneer history. Nearly half the area of the United States was first opened from the shores of the Missouri River.

Finally its canoes; its ferries; and the steamboats all gave way as more modern means of transportation developed in their time.

Today, modern science has harnessed this wild and difficult stream – “The Big Muddy” – once the river of ridicule; the river of disdain, full of sandbars, snags and flooded lands in its shifting channel from bluff to bluff in its torturous course to the sea.

Now its banks are being rapidly stabilized; its current directed and controlled, and its large valley protected from its ravaging habits. Modern towboats of undreamed power, and barges of enormous carrying capacity, herald another great advance in the history of the advance of transportation needs in the west. The blast of their whistles will only resound from the beautiful bluffs along the valley, but the repercussion and throb of a new day will quicken the pulse of the hand upon every plow and speed the movement of every employee in the factories throughout the Missouri River states.

A far cry from the days of the canoe, keelboat, and side-wheeler!

In its early province, this stream knitted together a nation of power, now it brings parity to the Middle West and an enlargement of the horizon of its people. It offsets the adverse effects of the Panama Canal for a landlocked region. This canal, built and paid for by all the people, immediately gave great advantage in freight rates to every coast town and city, and a deep coast belt all around three sides of the United States.
Month by month the manufacturers in the middle west found their markets dwindling and being taken over by the sections favored by the Canal. For example, even the farmer growing alfalfa hay on the plains of Kansas and Nebraska soon lost this rightful market in the cotton states through the Memphis gateway. He was no longer able to meet the competition of California hay distributed by an all water route through the Panama Canal.

A survey conducted ten years ago by the Real Estate Board of Kansas City disclosed the fact that many of the large factories of Kansas City were forced to establish branches on the Gulf and the Pacific coasts in order to retain the markets they had enjoyed for so long.

With the pending possibility of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River Waterway, another large section of our country to the north of us would enjoy advantages over us in freight rates.

Truly, these Middle Western states of the Union were rapidly being marooned into the highest rate zone in America – now the opening of the Missouri River for transportation brings the sea to our farms, towns, and cities. The longest haul agricultural territory in the world has its prayer fulfilled!

For fifty years practically every civic leader of greater Kansas City and its trade territory has fought for the improvement of the river! The well-being of any community is not an accident. Achievement comes only from sustained effort of its citizenry. Let us all pay tribute tonight to those fine and unselfish leaders such as William Rockhill Nelson; Walter S. Dickey; Robert A. long; Irwin Kirkwood; Leon Smith; Joseph T. Bird; Henry D. Faxon; W.T. Bland; Edwin Clendenning, and many others who did not live to enjoy this eventful day.

No weak cause could have lived through all these years and stirred the business instincts of such an illustrious line of wise and conservative men. For years these men proclaimed there could be no real national prosperity with the Middle West suffering from transportation handicap in our race for commercial growth and an outlet for the products of our farms.

No large city or community on the globe has ever failed to use its harbors or the sea or its navigable lakes. No one ever questioned the wise Federal policy of developing the utmost of greatest use of natural resources.

In few countries of the world have the navigable rivers been so neglected as in America. Study the world map and find any city which has become great in size without water transportation. The use of the Missouri River is simply our birthright to nature’s opportunities. It is the answer to our insistent demand for a lower freight cost to domestic and foreign countries. It is our inherent right to live in world competition. It is not sentiment – it is simply good business sense!

Water transportation on inland waterways is no mirage – it is one of our greatest instruments for sound economic growth.

Is not any community in its forward progress, entitled to every form of desirable transportation?
Would anyone despair the advent of auto or truck?
Would you call a halt to the mastery of the air?
Would you check the great growth of streamline trains and the electrification of railroads?
Are we not entitled to the greatest possible coordination of all our forces in efficient and advanced methods of transportation?
No great people can long be denied the benefits of every improvement in living and business conditions in their pursuit of a livelihood.
The history of progress from the caveman and savagery has been a romantic and thrilling story of the grasping of every new weapon for the improvement of the human race.

Yes, there has been few greater achievements in modern physical science than the improvement of our long neglected inland waterways. Some may still be doubters – the last generation doubted the radio; the speaking movie; the conquest of the air – army engineers have blazed the trail – Kansas City and its trade territory celebrates the opening of barge service to St. Louis, Memphis, New Orleans and the sea. It stands tonight closer in freight costs to St. Paul, Minneapolis, Chicago, and all the harbors of the Great Lakes!

As I say – history repeats itself and once again we can move our products in and out of all the cities along the Ohio, even on to Pittsburgh!

We are proud to be part of a 3,300-mile system of trunk waterways, ably advocated by Herbert Hoover, while still Secretary of Commerce, and adopted without reservation by both of our great national parties. Franklin Delano Roosevelt has given unstinted cooperation since the day of his inauguration, to every feasible development of these waterways.

Soon, this sweep of progress will go northward to Leavenworth, St. Joseph, Omaha, Sioux City and Yankton and beyond, Some day 6,000 miles more of tributary streams will be added to our present system.

Our civic leaders have made the fight for generations – our Federal Government has answered our calls – army engineers have braved new fields of achievement in making a high and lasting mark in engineering progress!

It is now up to our shippers to display the same faith; to gain savings at their door and spread their markets over a greater field. Business will beget business – traffic will create traffic.

Intensive farming of the fertile lands extending far in all directions from our city, without restraining deserts, barren lands or forbidding mountains, can build a greater consuming population for the factories in our cities. More factories in turn build larger cities and make a greater nearby market for the products of our farms.

The railroads in our region, which have played such an important part in building the west, and are today bending every effort to still further improve their efficiency and service to the people, will share in the growth of a more prosperous and populous empire. The great bulk of river freight will comprise combined river and rail hauls.
Many of our farseeing executives of railroads whose major part of their business is in the Missouri River valley, have long seen the advantage even to them in the establishing of water transportation. Their destiny is vitally linked with the growth of this region.

We must all have faith. Any great evolution in industrial and agricultural progress does not come in a day. I say for fifty years we have made the fight! New currents of possibilities are born at this hour – let us take an added determination of movement forward. The old Mississippi barrier in freight rates should soon disappear and bring us an equality in our struggle for growth.

With your help, this service will grow in benefits to us all – running time on the River will gradually lessen – more frequent service will come with added traffic. Many grain elevators will seek river terminals. Private barge lines will come as the Inland Waterways Corporation, under its great leader, General Ashburn, demonstrates the assurance of the dependability of our great river. Fort Peck in a year or two will almost double the possible size of the tows and barges.

The old, indomitable spirit that founded this town in hardships and perils, has a new dawn of opportunity – it is now up to the progressive men of our part of the great Nation!

Will the Middle West, which in recent years has not been maintaining its proportionate growth, take its proper place in the growth of our country? Certainly a new resource is in our hands.

I predict within fewer years than any of us think, or dare to hope, this great and national factor given us today will bring added wealth and joy of living to our splendid and courageous people. This event comes at our emergence from years of commercial and agricultural depression and builds new morale in our ranks. It challenges our imagination.

Yes, our history does repeat itself – in more ways than one. Let us go out from here today with the same daring, the same prowess that carved our ten Missouri River states from the wilderness of an untamed river and endless prairie in the days of long ago.

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) – Speech JCN033
Arguably Jesse Clyde Nichols (1880-1950) was the single most influential individual to the development of metropolitan Kansas City. Moreover his work, ideas, and philosophy of city planning and development had far-reaching impact nationally – so much so that the Urban Land Institute has established the J.C. Nichols Prize for Visionary Urban Development to recognize a person or a person representing an institution whose career demonstrates a commitment to the highest standards of responsible development.

Nichols’ objective was to “develop whole residential neighborhoods that would attract an element of people who desired a better way of life, a nicer place to live and would be willing to work in order to keep it better.” The Company under Nichols and his son, Miller Nichols (1911- ), undertook such ventures as rental housing, industrial parks, hotels, and shopping centers. Perhaps the most widely recognized Nichols Company developments are the Country Club District and the Country Club Plaza Shopping Center, reportedly the first shopping area in the United States planned to serve those arriving by automobile rather than trolley car.

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) contains both personal and business files concerning J.C. Nichols' private and business life. Included are personal correspondence, family related material, and speeches and articles written by him. Business and financial files pertain to actions of the Company, including information about different developments and the securing of art objects; and printed materials produced by and about the Company.