



*Planning for Permanence: the Speeches of J.C. Nichols*  
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**Individual vs. Collective Effort**

Plaza Association, Fall of 1933

As I look back over my life – high school days; college; the years I spent driving a huckster wagon; the year I spent sleeping on a cot in the back of a cold meat market at 1611 Grand Ave., getting up at four in the morning and working until ten at night; to the time that I built more than 100 little separate houses in Kansas City, Kansas., with no office except an old second hand desk back of the prescription counter of a cheap drug store; the first ten acres we bought when we started at 50th and Grand and started the Country Club District. I recall the times that I spent half the day building board sidewalks, loading rock on wagons and then the other half out trying to sell houses; and then the long 25 years of constant fight to build a residence district which is today regarded as the finest in the entire world. And then many long years of doubt and uncertainty of failure and bankruptcy that confronted us in the early days – as I look back over my various public activities, serving as chairman or vice chairman of every campaign during the war and the fight to raise money for the Liberty Memorial; as chairmen of the committee that located the memorial; my eight years fight to help get a new water plant for Kansas City; my long fight to get a city planning and zoning law through the Missouri legislature; my eight years presidency of the art institute, taking the institution when it was almost defunct and heavily in debt, building the membership manifold and the school attendance several times over, and finally turning it over as a strong going institution; my ten years struggle to get the Missouri River improved for navigation to make Kansas City a great industrial center and bring relief to our farmers in this part of the country by reducing their freight rates; I recall that when I began this work the Government was spending \$150,000 a year on our river, and now I have gotten over 60 million spent so far and 40 million more promised for this year – I recall the feeble beginning some six years ago in starting our collection of art for our gallery which will be opened December 11th and will rank probably fifth or sixth in all the collections of America – when I recall all these and the many other activities into which I have put my blood and soul for more than a quarter of a century – when I study the workings of the Commerce Trust Co.; the Kansas City Fire and Marine; Business Men’s Assurance Co., K.C. Title & Trust, and the other business institutions of which I am a director, I become more and more impressed with the idea that success may be developed by the individual if he puts the same individual effort into everything he undertakes that he feels the group with which he is associated should do collectively. As I look back through the years, the man who has failed is the man who has stood idly by and let the group do the work – the man who has stood back and let the other members of his business give their time and money to promote the good cause while he has failed to do his individual part.

I do not mention the many activities in my life in a sense of immodesty, but simply to draw the conclusion that out of all of this experience the theme I have chosen to talk to you about tonight is my honest conclusion based upon my own personal experience concerning the greatest factors attending success in life.

Plaza Shops are one large Department Store – all departments injured by one weak one – one offended customer in just one shop may drive her trade away from all other shops.

Every time you please a customer you create a potential buyer for every other shop in the Plaza Shopping Center – every time you get a new out of town customer you are helping your neighbors. Every letter, every telephone call, every advertising leaflet you send out helps build trade for all the Plaza. None of us can go it alone, we are all closely related together in a beautiful shopping center with great potentialities, and if everyone adds just a little more effort to what they are already doing, it is hard to over estimate the great increase of trade which will result collectively. There are people in my office working everyday compiling new lists for your use. Just last week we got the list of the Barstow and Sunset Hill school girls; the list of the Art Institute students which is 250; and twenty new members of the Kansas City University faculty. New lists are constantly being obtained for any of you who wish to use them. It is not an easy matter for our office to keep an up-to-the-minute record of every family who moves into the County Club District. We keep from one to two people in our office at our expense working all the time to keep our lists up to date. These lists are all available for the members of the Plaza Association and I urge you to use them.

You would be surprised at the number of new people moving in to Kansas City every week from out of town and certainly the psychological time to get them to form the “Plaza habit” is immediately upon their arrival here.

Boost your neighbors – otherwise why should they boost for you?

Boost doctors, or second floor shops.

Help us get tenants.

Let us individually cooperate with our show windows. One dark window is like a missing tooth – one dirty or unattractive window can nauseate your nearby fellow merchant’s best customer and drive trade away from your whole block.

Referring trade – endless chain.

Visiting week. No one in Plaza knows all the other merchant’s clerks. Certainly you can capitalize your own personality. Get acquainted with the filling station attendants – they frequently can send customers your way.

Luncheon attendance – get acquainted.

No hermits wanted in Plaza. The man or woman never intimately associates with his fellow merchants gets into a rut – and the only difference between a rut and grave is there are two ends to a grave, but a rut goes on forever.

A bear hibernates for six months at a time and lives up his fat, but a proud lion has nerve and great courage, is ever on the alert and always on the hunt for his prey, and the lion is the king of beasts. Are we to be bears or lions?

Despair and suicide come among those who live to themselves – joy of life and prosperity come to those who love people – who makes friends – are buoyant and enthusiastic in their contacts and serve their fellowmen.

I know one merchant in the Plaza where customers dislike to go because he always gives them the blues. We don't need only "fair weather merchants", we need those who come strong in adversity – who know no defeat and override all obstacles.

For the good of the merchants, and what wise, sensible merchant doesn't welcome constructive criticism and suggestions? We recently asked a great many customers who buy in the Plaza, covering a wide range in types of people, to confidentially and frankly give us their comments or criticisms about the treatment they receive in Plaza shops. In fact, some time ago a friendly visitor was employed to call at many shops and report as to the manner in which they were received. All of the following suggestions have come from these reports and comments. Of course, all of them do not apply to any one merchant, but I will venture to say that there is hardly a merchant in the room but what can improve his sales methods as a result of at least one or two of the following suggestions: Telephone inquiries are often handled without proper tact. Many clerks are indifferent, looking away while waiting on a customer carrying on a conversation with another clerk while serving a customer. Your customer wants your undivided attention. A young lady clerk is sometimes more interested in "priming" her hair or arranging her necklace than she is, in trying to please her customer. It certainly is very poor policy to engage in an argument with a customer. This is dangerous and I would fire a clerk who did such a thing. Some clerks make the mistake of using too superlative descriptive adjectives such as telling a customer something looks "heavenly" or "darling" on her. It is equally offensive to a customer to be called "honey", "dearie" or "girlie"; or to have a clerk answer "alrighty", be pleasant and friendly but never gushing.

Always be interested in your customers' desires, (Mrs. N's. experience, Wilkie)

Do you make your customer feel cheap? Or, do you give the impression that nothing is too much trouble for you to do to please? Never forget for a moment, or allow your clerks to forget that "the customer is always right."

Customers are always interested in new things – new styles – new shipments (even unpack them in the customer's presence) – new methods of manufacture. They like to gain new information – old things can always be told in a new way. The world loves the spirit of youth – enthusiasm – progress – advancement. Everyone likes to ride at the head of the parade and certainly not in a hearse.

Our visitor said you can go into some of the shops and come away so sad you feel it's time to pray and wonder why the clerks don't call it a day and put on crepe.

No salesman should overdress; always avoid too much jewelry, too much paint (don't try to look like a night club hostess; too striking color combinations in clothes; rattling money in pocket; dirty finger nails; don't drum on showcases; don't talk too loudly (hose story); don't talk too low; don't chew gum; avoid dandruff on your

shoulders; avoid a slouching position; irritating little habits such as rubbing nose, biting finger nails, going without a shave, or looking sour as an owl. Don't complain to your customer about how tired you are, or how badly you feel.

Smiles win friends and trade everywhere, and remember they mean the same in every language. A salesman with a real genuine smile can sell a sewing machine to a bachelor or a late year's telephone book at a premium. I'd rather hire a clerk with a sincere smile than a college degree.

Neatness and orderliness of person; inconspicuous appearance, void of showiness – just pleasant, genteel, helpful manners, win the way through the world and to the hearts of your customers.

Be careful never to underrate your customer. (Mrs Kirkwood story “maid”) (Child story at Burnap Meyers) (Chauffeur story, “Stanley”) (Negro story, mistreated)

Always learn names of customers and have your clerk do likewise. Know the names of children and call them by their names when they come into the store. (Schoenhard). This gets the whole gang of that child, and the child's friendship is a wide open road to the parent's heart.

It is fine to remember what you sold them last and inquire as to its satisfaction.

Always notice and speak to customers as they come into your store. Even if you are busy at the time make an opportunity to welcome the new customer – be gracious and a host to everyone – they are your guests the same as they would be in your home.

Always speak to a customer that another clerk is waiting upon.

Don't stand and wait for your customer to come to you. Come forward immediately when a customer enters the store and make them feel that you are anxious to serve them.

When your customer leaves go to the door with him, open the door – not only for those who have purchased – cordially invite them to come again and smile, SMILE, SMILE.

If you do not have the customer's needs and you know they cannot find it in the Plaza, offer to order it; or be sure to telephone your customer when you have it.

Remember subtle suggestion has more sales power than high pressure steam roller tactics.

Nothing gains confidence in your shop more than favorable comments about your competitor. This rings honesty. Your competitor hears of it and returns the favor by praising you to his customers. We are not Robinson Crusoe's living on a deserted island, but living in an age of co-operation.

Nothing is more offensive to a customer than to make him feel you are rushing him, or are afraid to work a few minutes over time.

“High hatting” never builds future business. There were some complaints about our more exclusive shops. We were surprised to have so many customers tell us that

certain merchants were “snooty” and independent in their attitude. I must tell you just what we got in our reports.

Your clerk is just as important as you are. Like or dislike of them spreads like wild fire, and either builds or ruins your trade.

Always offer to wrap into a large bundle a number of small packages bought elsewhere.

Never criticize a customer. Back fence gossip sooner or later reaches the ear of the customer and simply kills you forever, not only with that one particular person, but with a dozen or more of that persons friends.

Never criticize a clerk in the presence of customer (Mrs. Jones) or behind his back.

Never under any circumstances express strong political, religious or social opinions until you are sure your customer agrees with your views (Plummer) (suicide)

Be careful you don't build a Chinese wall between you and your customer.

Yes, the Plaza is a great field of opportunity for collective effort – all pulling strong on the oars for one another. It is a great field for good sportsmanship, fair play, and helping one another.

Let's turn on the heat – let's pep up the whole machine let's get our airplane stride and get off the oxen train route. Let's play our part of a great program – the sky is the limit – 200 miles or more radius is our territory – not 600,000 in greater Kansas City but 1,000,000 or more in our domain.

Many merchants and employees here will some day be the merchant princes of the middle west – all big merchants in K. C. started in a small way and grew large by always doing their part.

Yes, we have survived the world's greatest depression. Thank God we are still on the firing line ready to ride with inflation on high price of hogs, cattle and wheat.

Let us all spring to our posts whether it is giving out bridge lesson tickets; joining in on the Plaza Stylist, “Thrifty day Broadcast”, visiting week, O'Keefe's intellectual and Business System luncheons; boosting our competitors; Plaza apartments; welcoming every new merchant, or whatever the cause. Let's follow our noble, unselfish president and hard working committees.

New high ways are being built leading to the Plaza hundreds of new families are moving every year into our trade zone. Soon new business structures will increase the size of the Plaza; many new large office organizations will join us, giving us a daily increased mass trade; many of you will be doubling your space.

Build for the future, and do individually what you believe is wise collectively. Don't knock, don't criticize, If you disagree with some association activity, attend the meetings and suggest changes, but always loyally abide by the majority opinion.

Let's make the plaza truly the world's greatest shopping center and let's have the satisfaction and financial reward of doing our full individual part in a great achievement

made possible not by J.C. Nichols Co. alone but by the hearts, souls, brain, and energy of 200 wonderful merchants all pulling together, each playing his part in the game in a masterful way.

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) – Speech JCN022

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.