

How Kansas City's West Bottoms Went From Vacant To Vibrant

By [CODY NEWILL](#) • AUG 13, 2014

Within the old bones of big brick buildings like the Columbia Burlap & Bag Co., in Kansas City's West Bottoms, new businesses, artist studios and restaurants are finding success in an area that still looks like it belongs in the late 1800s.

One spot that's finding particular success is the 12th Street Bridge and the surrounding buildings. First Friday "Warehouse Weekends" and antique shops bring in thousands of visitors each month.

But it wasn't always this way. In fact, parts of the West Bottoms were practically deserted for nearly 40 years.

An industrial hub and the Great Flood of 1951

When it was founded in 1871, the West Bottoms quickly became the center of Kansas City's livestock and meat packing industries. Even though the area experienced frequent flooding from the surrounding Kansas and Missouri Rivers, it still managed to stay active for 80 years.

The downfall of the West Bottoms came quickly and unexpectedly. From May to July 1951, record rainfalls caused catastrophic flooding along the Kansas and Missouri Rivers. Cities across eastern Kansas and Missouri were wiped out as flood waters flowed east towards St. Louis.

Since the West Bottoms sits directly on both rivers, it was hit the hardest. Flood waters put nearly two million acres of land underwater, ruining virtually all the businesses in the area. CBS radio broadcaster Jim Burke described the devastation.

"To those of you who have never witnessed a flood and the resultant effects, let me tell you, it's a sickening sight," Burke reported. "The area is a sea of filth and muck, which, in depth, must be at least 12 inches."

The Great Flood of 1951 shut down the West Bottoms for the next 40 years. Kemper Arena would bring some activity back to the area after opening in 1974, but most of the buildings north of it remained derelict until the early

1990s.

The tides turn for the Bottoms

One of the big turning points for the West Bottoms [was the haunted houses](#). Full Moon Productions decided to relocate "The Edge of Hell" to the Bottoms in 1988. Rezoning forced the company out of its original downtown building, and the vacant, creepy vibe of the West Bottoms seemed like the perfect fit.

Full Moon Productions Vice President Amber Arnett-Bequeaith says that it took a lot of hands-on work by her company and others to get the West Bottoms where it is today.

"Everyone thinks, 'Why didn't I see the diamond in the rough before?'" Arnett-Bequeaith said. "This has been years and years and years of work."

Rancher and real estate developer Bill Haw came to the West Bottoms around the same time as Full Moon Productions. He moved his ranching business into the old Livestock Exchange in 1991 and started courting other businesses to join him. Livestock Exchange property manager Kerry Amigoni says that the stigma of the Bottoms was hard for some business owners to overcome.

"Initially, it was just getting them to even come look," Amigoni said of the challenges. "Not a lot of brokers brought down people, so it really had to be word of mouth."

The West Bottoms today

Successful businesses have started to bring in festivals and the arts as well. In June, Boulevard held its inaugural Boulevardia Festival under the 12th Street Bridge, and Gay Pride Kansas City held its festival in the Bottoms for the first time.

Keli O'Neill Wenzel, executive director for Boulevardia, said that the urban grit of the West Bottoms was a big factor in the festival's success.

"When we saw the people coming down, [they] were excited about the event," O'Neill Wenzel said. "But the space is truly what I feel like people got very excited about."

Despite these successes, there are still areas of the Bottoms that are

struggling. Since the Sprint Center opened in 2007, Kemper Arena has hemorrhaged \$500,000 of city money per year. The American Royal currently holds a lease on the arena until 2045 and wants to see the arena demolished in order to build a smaller facility.

At the same time, a competing, privately funded plan by developer Foutch Brothers would refurbish the arena for youth sports leagues. [City council's Economic Development Committee just held their first meeting and tour of Kemper in July](#), and promises to make recommendations within three months.

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