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by Cheryl Eichar-Jett

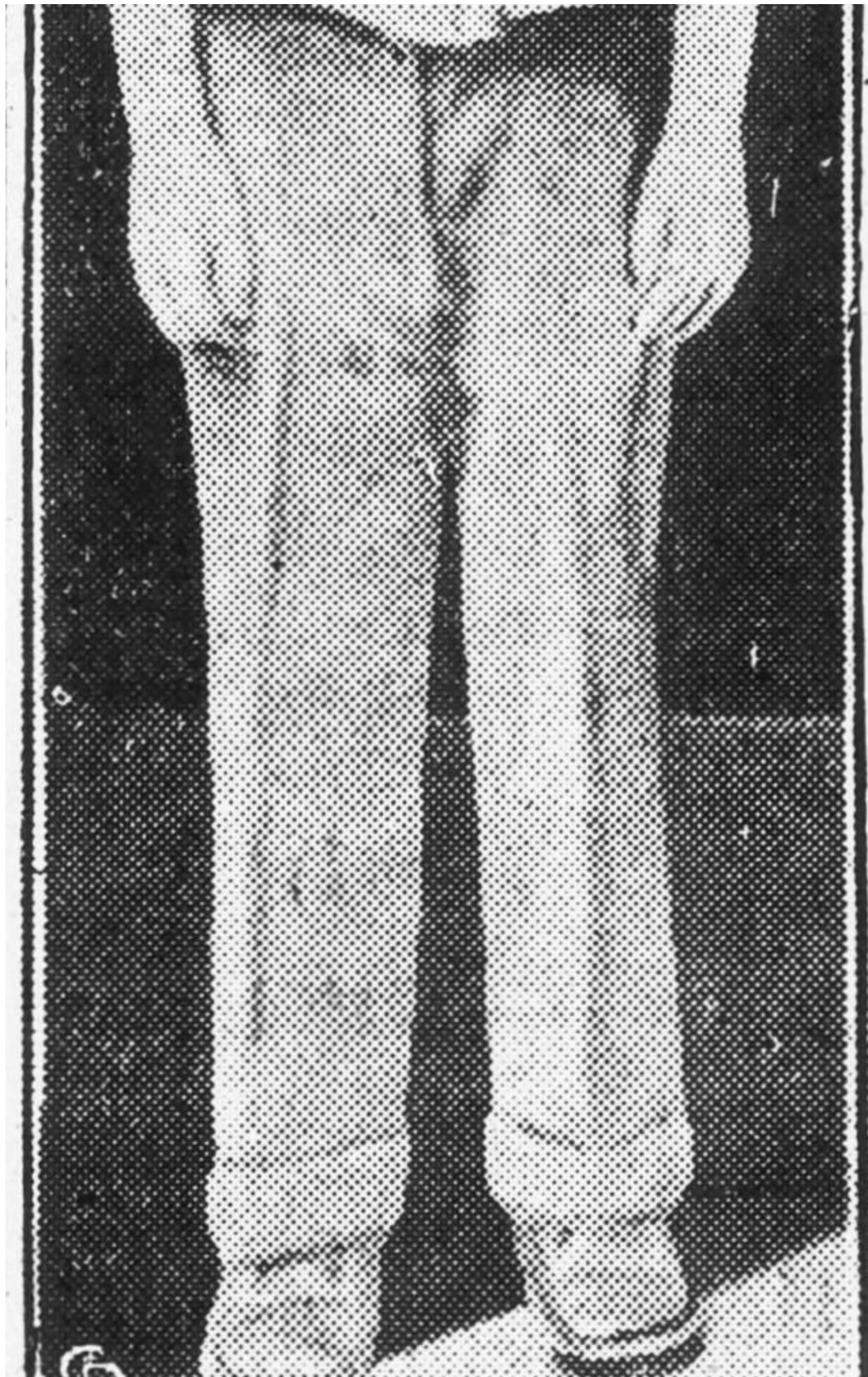
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The new Illinois State Arsenal, a massive turreted building resembling a medieval fort at the intersection of Monroe and Second Streets in Springfield, was dedicated on June 4, 1903, by none other than President Theodore Roosevelt. Thirty years later, a ten-year-old boy burned it down.

The arsenal, known locally as “the Castle” due to its medieval appearance complete with battlements atop its multiple turrets, was solidly constructed by Springfield's Culver Stone and Marble Co. at a cost of \$150,000. Dedication day festivities included a well-attended grand ball with two dance bands. The new building replaced the old Civil-War era arsenal which stood on North Fifth Street.

“The Castle” served in that era to store munitions and supplies for state troops and to provide a large open auditorium with room for drill exercises. In 1908, the new arsenal saw use as a temporary refuge for victims of the August race riots, when mobs of whites rampaged against the city's African-American residents. More pleasant and peaceful uses of the arsenal ensued as the huge auditorium was realized to be a perfect venue for concerts, speeches, balls, exhibitions, and car shows. In addition to Theodore Roosevelt for the building's dedication, Presidents Calvin Coolidge, William Howard Taft, Herbert Hoover, and Franklin D. Roosevelt all appeared there for one event or another.

Celebrities who performed there included Will Rogers, John Philip Sousa and his band, Arturo Toscanini and the La Scala Orchestra, and the Paul Whiteman band with a young Bing Crosby on the tour.

In November of 1926, traffic flowing through the city on the newly-designated U.S. Highway 66 joined the rumble of the city's own traffic to move past the arsenal on north-south Second Street. The Illinois State Capital building, completed in 1888, stood just south, also on the west side of the street.

In a few more years, the nation was in the grip of the Great Depression, and in 1934 Springfield would see choking dust arrive from the Dust Bowl Plains and suffer through one of the state's most brutal summers. But in February 1934, some semblance of daily life still carried on in Springfield. On Sunday, February 18, no special events appeared to have been planned at the “the Castle,” but daily activities went on with officials on duty.

That day, a ten-year-old boy in a leather jacket and tweed cap named Cecil Kiper, smoking a cigarette, strolled into the Arsenal. There, he encountered the arsenal custodian, E. N. Bradley, who told the boy to leave, to which he was reported to respond, “Nerts to you.”

In the building, which he clearly didn't leave as he was told, young Kiper apparently tested out his fire-building skills in a washroom, starting a fire in a wastebasket. Everett Secrest, a janitor or watchman, spotted the boy, who reported the washroom fire, and then went to extinguish the small blaze. But Secrest remembered the boy. According to reports, Cecil then moved along to the auditorium, where he filled a bag with shavings, added some lead solder to burn well, lit a match to it, and tossed it onto the stage, where it ignited the draperies. Not sticking around, Cecil hightailed it back home, where he picked up and read a school book entitled Good Citizenship. But he later returned to the fire to watch.

Despite the stone exterior, the Arsenal burned within. The conflagration consumed the interior, filling downtown Springfield with smoke and the roar of exploding munitions. Newspaper reports totaled the damage at anywhere from \$750,000 to \$1 million and the human cost at no deaths, but a variety of minor injuries.

Cecil Kiper was identified by the arsenal officials that had seen and talked with him, and the fourth-grader was taken into custody at Douglas School. Governor Henry Horner and State Fire Marshal Sherman V. Coultas questioned Cecil for two hours, after which the governor called the boy's story “unbelievable and unnerving.” Young Kiper confessed to starting the fire, but later his mother, Mrs. Cal Nicholson, stated that he told her that “one of the men gave me a quarter to say I started the fire,” according to an article in the Streator (Illinois) Times, and that the “men promised to let me go home if I admitted it.” The Sangamon County Detention Home held Cecil while authorities wondered what to do with him. The boy was said to have a history of playing with matches, setting fires, and enjoying watching things burn. State Criminologist Dr. Paul Schroeder, after interviewing the boy, called him a “mentally sick child.”

Cecil's father, Gilbert Kiper, had remarried and moved to Hayden, New Mexico. The father and stepmother came forward to ask for custody of his son, a solution to the problem which Illinois authorities apparently welcomed after considering placing him in a foster home or sending him to reform school. Sangamon County Judge O. B. Irwin ordered the boy released into his father's care, and Cecil's mother, wife of Cal Nicholson, consented to the custody change, perhaps also relieved. On March 14, Cecil Kiper left Springfield with his father and stepmother to live on their Southwestern farm.

No sources that the author found turned up any reports of Cecil's life as he grew up in New Mexico, but at some point in time he returned to Springfield, Illinois, where it appears that he resided until his death at age 55 in 1979.

The destroyed arsenal was soon replaced on the same site with another massive (200,000 square feet), but differently-styled building, the Illinois State Armory, which has stood unused except for storage since 2008. The Armory, for many years in use for state troops and also as a civic center as “The Castle” had served, stands silent on the site where a small boy ignited a million-dollar fire.

STATE ARSENAL A CHARRED AND SMOKING RUIN

Fire believed to have started on the stage of the state arsenal in Springfield Sunday afternoon destroyed the 30 year old building. Included in the loss estimated to reach \$1,000,000 were irreplaceable records of Illinoisans and World war activities. Plans for rebuilding the arsenal Monday awaited the return of Governor Horner from Arizona where he has been passing a brief vacation.

—Redmon Photo.



Cheryl Eichar-Jett is the author of numerous books and articles about Route 66. Find her at www.route66chick.com and www.cheryleicharjett.com.

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