

WRITTEN IN STONE

AN ICONOGRAPHIC HISTORY OF MEMORIAL STADIUM

by Brandon Vogel

*Born of the earth
and touched by the deep blue sky
out of the distant past I come
unto you your mother corn
—Pawnee Ritual Song*

That's a pretty good quote for Nebraska. Rooted, agrarian, slightly fatalistic. You can find it on the north entrance of our state capitol thanks solely to the discretion of one man: Hartley Burr Alexander.

Of course if you're from Nebraska you probably know him better for a much more famous quote on a much more famous building. It was Alexander who, as a philosophy professor at the University, came up with the de facto motto of Cornhusker football: "Not the victory but the action; Not the goal but the game; In the deed, the glory."

That quote, engraved on the southwest corner of the stadium, was one of four supplied by Alexander prior to the construction of Memorial Stadium in 1923. The three others:

Northwest: *Courage; Generosity; Fairness; Honor; In these are the true awards of manly sport.*

Southeast: *In Commendation of the men of Nebraska who served and fell in the Nations Wars.*

Northeast: *Their Lives they held the countrys trust; They kept its faith; They died its heroes.*

Now consider the fact that Cornhusker fans' second favorite quote, "Through these gates pass the greatest fans in college football," appears above every entrance to the stadium and then don't forget that the Boy Orator of the Platte chimes in over on the Osborne Athletic Complex. Collectively you have a lot of writing on the home of the Cornhuskers. No matter where you find yourself around the exterior of Memorial Stadium, if you simply look up, there is probably something to read.

Why?

I have a theory but it involves an American architectural movement, the state capitol, and Rockefeller Center so we should probably start at the nexus of those three themes: Hartley Burr Alexander.

ICONIC HEIGHTS

Alexander was born in Lincoln on April 9, 1873, the son of a Methodist minister and newspaper editor. Growing up in Syracuse, Nebraska, Alexander parlayed that letters-heavy pedigree into a lifetime of academic notability.

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After completing his undergraduate degree at the University of Nebraska, Alexander continued on to the University of Pennsylvania before earning his Ph.D. in Philosophy from Columbia University. From New York he set out for Boston, working as a contributor to *Webster's Dictionary* before accepting an appointment to the philosophy department at his alma mater and returning to Nebraska in 1906.

It was while at Nebraska that Alexander would make his name as an authority on American Indian mythology¹ and as an “iconographer,” a term he conveniently coined.² Nowhere is the confluence of his two areas of expertise more apparent than the Nebraska State Capitol building.

Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, the architect commissioned to build the capitol, needed quotes for his building to help illustrate a Nebraska-centric theme. In 1921, he sought out Alexander, the author of such ambitious titles as *Odes on the Generation of Man* and *The Religious Spirit of the American Indian*, for that very purpose.³ Ten years later you had the capitol building you largely see today, a vast collage of American Indian murals, agricultural imagery, bas-relief bison, and general Nebraskaness.

But what does all this have to do with Nebraska football?

Timing. The quotes you still see on the stadium today likely represent one of the first movements in Alexander's life as an iconographic composer.

The first game at Memorial Stadium, a 24–0 victory over Oklahoma, was played October 13, 1923. Construction on the stadium had begun barely more than three months prior to the first game thanks to the fundraising efforts of a group of students, faculty, and alumni the previous season.⁴

Nobody seems exactly sure when Alexander offered his now immortal words for inclusion on the pillars of Memorial Stadium, but given the roughly six-month turnaround on the stadium, from ground-breaking to grinding out a win against the Sooners, it is likely that he was already hard at work on the state capitol when he, according to UNL Chair and Architecture Librarian Kay Logan-Peters, “just made them up.”⁵

It was the Nebraska State Capitol building that would launch Alexander's career as an architectural iconographer. In the years to follow he would go on to contribute decorative themes and inscriptions to the Los Angeles Public Library, the Oregon State Capitol, the Justice Department Building in Washington D.C., and



The most memorable quote at Memorial Stadium is hidden behind newer construction on the west side. To see it, you need to look up.

Rockefeller Center. In layman's terms, if you wanted words to etch into buildings—and this was a period of American architecture where almost everyone did—Hartley Burr Alexander was your man.

While he made notable and sometimes controversial architectural contributions on both coasts, Alexander's true path to iconic heights started smack-dab in the middle in Lincoln, Nebraska. And if Memorial Stadium played a role in that eventual development it shouldn't be surprising that Nebraska football fans have taken so well to, and taken some ribbing for, constantly referring to Alexander's iconographic styling of Memorial Stadium.

That's what Nebraskans do. Lift up their own and it just so happens that it is much more difficult to refute, disprove, or generally disagree with words that are written in stone.

THE SUBJECT AND THE SYMBOL

Does Nebraska truly have “The Greatest Fans in College Football?” That is, after all, what it says on the stadium.

That question is one you'll see tackled elsewhere in this publication, but what's important here is that it's there, above every single gate. It is likely the most visible dose of boastfulness you can find anywhere in Nebraska.

Of course, boastfulness is an entirely subjective matter. Much like the notion of the “greatest fans,” it's impossible to prove empirically. One fan's pride is another's poison.

Imagine if the University of Colorado elected to put the same inscription on Folsom Field. Would you, as a Nebraska fan, feel outraged? What if South Florida, a relative newcomer on the college football scene, were to build a new stadium and insist that it appear on their facility? Would you feel cheated?

The answer in both cases is probably “yes.” They haven’t earned that, you might say. Nebraska, on the other hand, has when you look at the evidence. Memorial Stadium has been sold out since November 3, 1962, a period that now spans 45 years, 289 games, and the addition of over 50,000 seats. On game days it becomes the third-largest city in the state. We applaud the opponent, win or lose. Opposing fans rave about the way they are treated.

All of those things are either factual or, unless you’re Kirk Herbstreit or a fan of a bitter Big 12 rival, generally perceived to be true. Does that merit the inclusion of the quote on the stadium?

Depends on what color you wear but Hartley Burr Alexander probably would have said yes. Iconography is based on the relationship between symbol and subject and, perhaps transcendently, Memorial Stadium has, through all of the monuments and meaning we’ve attached to it, come to serve as both the subject and the symbol. It is the home of the Cornhuskers and, as they are the source of so much pride, a home for all of Nebraska.



Built in 1923, Memorial Stadium has undergone many changes since this picture was taken in 1974.

THE RISE OF MEMORIAL STADIUM

Conceptually, Memorial Stadium was supposed to be a one million dollar jack-of-all trades. Not just a football stadium but a “gymnasium, war museum, and gathering place for veterans.”⁶ While the Alumni Association elected to scale back their initial estimate to a more manageable \$450,000, 80 some years, a couple pieces of sculpture and numerous renovations later, you have a stadium that’s probably exceeded the grandiose expectations of that post–World War I era.

So Memorial Stadium isn’t officially a war museum or a gathering place for veterans. It is, however, our collective house, Nebraska’s house, but not in the trash-talking sports fan sense of the word and definitely not literally. It’s much more figurative than that.

While some coaches’ wives could probably make compelling arguments to the contrary, nobody “lives” in Memorial Stadium. However, if you look around a Nebraska message board or spend a Saturday watching the game at a bar or simply ask a fan in red, you’ll find no shortage of people who will tell you that Nebraska football is their life. Memorial Stadium, while not technically inhabited by anyone, has been home to a lot of living (vicariously) in 85 years and what do you do once you’ve found a home? You decorate it.

The east side of the stadium could be considered the practical side. Memorial Stadium was designed as a soldier’s memorial, hence the two, straightforward, honorific quotes you’ll find there. The west side, with the new façade that essentially makes it Memorial Stadium’s front door, is the values side. While it is “in the deed the glory” that’s most frequently quoted and now given the front and center treatment, both sayings on the west side are illustrating the same point: the value is not in the outcome but in the competition.

Today those quotes would be “It’s not whether you win or lose but how you play the game” so there’s something to be said for poetic overstatement. But no matter how you say it, the sentiment is undeniably something that Nebraska football fans value. Sure the ideal can become obscured when, for example, your coach has lost nine of his first 10 games against Oklahoma or when you feel like your athletic director has egomaniacally taken the program hostage, but that all changes once you get to the stadium. It has to.

In addition to the Alexander quotes, Nebraska has continued to add reminders around Memorial Stadium. There’s the Husker Legacy statue on the east side that

shows six Husker defenders swarming a Kansas State ball carrier. Outside the Osborne Athletic Complex you have yet another quote from a famous Nebraskan, William Jennings Bryan's "Destiny is not a matter of chance, it is a matter of choice," taken from an 1899 speech entitled "America's Mission."⁷

Below that quote you have the statue that perhaps best captures the modern Cornhusker ethos. Brook Berringer, the guy who had the misfortune of playing quarterback at the same time as Tommie Frazier but made the most of his seven-game stint as the starter during the 1994 title run, stands there receiving instruction from Tom Osborne, his demeanor as stoic in bronze as it was in real life. It's not an action statue but that's pretty fitting. Like Dr. Tom, an outsider might call it vanilla but a Nebraskan would call it perfect.

Not to cheapen the experience, but a trip to Memorial Stadium can be a lot like visiting your local Successories kiosk: motivation everywhere. What is Memorial Stadium trying to say? That our football history is more significant than that of others? No. You could find the same sort of mythologizing at Alabama or Notre Dame or any other big-time football school.

Rather, I like to think Memorial Stadium says the things Cornhusker fans would be hesitant to say on their own. Beer and badgering sometimes render this theory irrelevant but on the whole, oratorical history of the "Great Commoner" aside, Nebraskans are more often noted for

their reticence rather than their eloquence. The great axiom of graduate student fiction workshops is "show don't tell," but it could just as well be the Nebraska state motto.

Telling someone that you're hard-working is, to borrow and clean up a phrase *not* from Bryan or Alexander, as useless as breasts on a bull. That sort of thing has to be shown. You don't claim to have the greatest fans in college football unless your history can back it up and you're prepared to earn it back with every new day. You don't etch an ideal or accomplishment in stone unless you're certain it will hold up through the losing seasons and low times.

Therein lays the true beauty of Memorial Stadium: it reveals how we see ourselves. While that may be of minimal importance to your average fan of the visiting team (or even grating), it's of great importance to us (and sociologists, cultural anthropologists, and their ilk). Through Alexander's initial contributions and the later additions, all you need to know about how Nebraska feels about its football team is right there on the stadium. It's the home of the Nebraska Cornhuskers and a Nebraskan's home. The source and subject of so much collective pride and that's permanent.

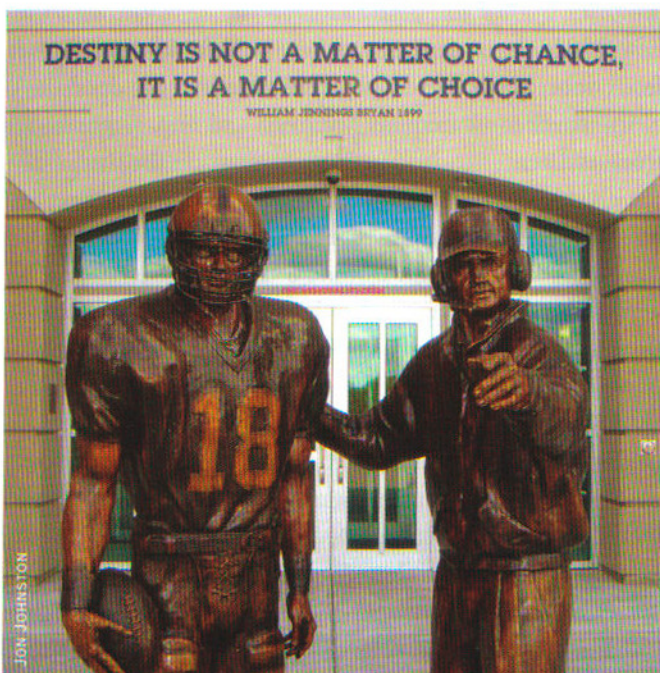
"Not the victory but the action; Not the goal but the game; In the deed the glory." You see that quote when you walk in and you see it when you walk out and while you're inside, cheering a win or a loss, the only thing that changes is you.

No matter the outcome, Nebraska football stays the same, a source of pride written for all to see.

Some may not like that, but don't bother arguing the point. Everything there is to say is already said. Just look up. **MSP**

ENDNOTES

- ¹ "Hartley Burr Alexander." January 1998. Nebraska State Historical Society. http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/timeline/alexander_hartley_burr.btm
- ² "Hartley Burr Alexander." April 10, 2007. Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hartley_Burr_Alexander
- ³ Luebke, Frederick C. 1990. *A Harmony of the Arts: The Nebraska State Capitol*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press: p. 33-34
- ⁴ "Memorial Stadium History/Records." 2006. 2006 Nebraska Football: Official Media & Recruiting Guide. U. of Nebraska Media Relations: p. 180
- ⁵ Fricke, Mark. March 15, 1998. "In the Deed-The Story." Husker Press Box. <http://www.huskernews.com/vnews/display.v/ART/1999/03/15/36ec23e95?inarc=1>
- ⁶ "Memorial Stadium." 2005. An Architectural Tour of Historic UNL. University of Nebraska-Lincoln. <http://historicbuildings.unl.edu/building.php?b=38>
- ⁷ "Osborne Athletic Complex." 2006. Huskers.com. http://www.huskers.com/ViewArticle.dbml?SPSID=57698&SPID=22&DB_OEM_ID=100&ATCLID=603642



Brook Berringer stands immortalized with Tom Osborne, a fitting addition to the stadium complex.