

Nebraska statehouse an open history book

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LINCOLN, Neb. — It's a beautiful structure, maybe the most striking statehouse in America, and it's justifiably been called an architectural wonder of the world. But it's the mottos covering the place that really make the trip worthwhile.

I'll wager that there are more political cliches and symbols carved into the stone walls of the 400-foot-high Nebraska State Capitol Building than on any other government edifice in the country. In an hour-long stroll around and through the city-block-sized base at 15th and J streets, we counted more than 200 depictions. A guard thought our tally was low.

Perhaps nowhere in America is so vividly displayed the gap between political philosophy and political reality. "THE SALVATION OF THE STATE IS WATCHFULNESS IN THE CITIZEN," declares

the streamer over the north doorway. That faces the direction of the Lancaster County Courthouse, where Attorney General Paul Douglas last year stood trial for lying about his role in regulating a bank that failed without federal deposit insurance. (He was convicted in mid-December.) Some 6,700 depositors should have heeded the call for vigilance.

Wisdom, Justice, Power and Mercy are constant guardians of the law: Each is represented by a sculpted figure along the outside of the building. Douglas is not among them. Wisdom, though, is holding a lawbook and a lamp-crested crown that a guidebook says signifies the Hebrew gift of wisdom and law.

The idea of the outside facade is to show the steady evolution of the rule of law over the rule of man. On the west side, there are Great Moments in Jurisprudence: the judgment of Solomon, the publication of the law of 12 tables in Rome, the establishment of a

people's tribunal in Rome, Plato writing his dialogue. We don't know how they missed Melvin Belli flying to Bhopal, India.

"POLITICAL SOCIETY EXISTS FOR THE SAKE OF NOBLE LIVING," proclaims the banner topping the south entrance, a sentiment, presumably, with which the residents of Highland Park would heartily agree. You want leaders? Well, how about Moses, Hammurabi, Julius Caesar and Justinian? There is also Charlemagne, who, as we recall, was heavy into feudalism.

King John is there, signing H. Ross Perot's copy of the Magna Charta, right next to the Founding Fathers writing the Constitution. We can make out Ben Franklin, George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, who himself later learned something about due

process at the hand, or the muzzle, of Aaron Burr.

On the east side there is Newton, whose discovery about gravity inspired the computer industry; Louis IX of the Age of Chivalry, Milton defending free speech, Lincoln (for whom this burg is named) signing the copy of the Emancipation Proclamation that Perot lost to Malcolm Forbes.

In what could be the country's first Miss America pageant, Miss Nebraska is shown standing before Miss Columbia applying for admittance into the union. Honest. The U.S. Capitol building (you know, the one that's smaller than the dome in Austin) is in the background. Miss Nebraska is flanked by an old man with a pickax and an anvil, and by a young man with a seed bag and a plow. They didn't require chaperons in those days.

All this is on the outside of the gothic-style capitol building, which is actually a giant square divided into four sections, each with a courtyard. The structure is topped by a tower wide enough for 14 stories of offices, a daring concept when construction was completed in 1932 at a cost of \$9.8 million.

The architect was Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, a noted church designer who had won a nationwide architectural competition in 1920. He died in 1924, before his ideas were implemented. In 1948, the Journal of the American Institute of Architects reported, a poll of 500 architects declared that Goodhue's work, which can be seen for 30 miles across the Nebraska plains, ranked fourth on a list of the best-built buildings in the world.

The inside is nearly as inspiring, a dazzling collection of murals, paintings, tapestries, engravings, mosaics, photographs and other forms of art illustrating Great Concepts.

The Homesteader's Campfire.

The First Furrow. The House Raising. The giant mosaic on the floor under the rotunda is said to represent Cosmic Energy of the Universe. There are panels showing Labor, Public Spirit, the Philosopher, though not, in this conservative state, the Labor Union. Various professions are depicted: Builder, Architect, Scientist, Sculptor. No one could tell us if the omission of Banker was intentional.

Some bare-breasted lasses dominate a set of murals in the north foyer floor: Spirit of the Soil, Spirit of Vegetation and Spirit of Animal Life. Spirit of the Drink has not yet made an appearance.

Down one hallway is the Nebraska Hall of Fame. Among the persons honored is Willa Cather. She is Nebraska's second best-known literary figure. The leader, of course, is Cliff Hillegass, the founder of that constant student companion, Cliffs Notes, whose headquarters are just a few blocks away. He's not eligible for induction, however, because he's still alive.

We thought the panels on the cross arches under the rotunda listed the members of Nebraska's one-house legislature. Actually, they showed native wildlife. On the west arch, for example, is the

following: skunk, possum, rat, hawk badger, field mouse and bear. You can understand our confusion.

On the east side, the Supreme Court chamber is lined with 8,000 separate pieces of walnut. Behind the judge's bench is the sage advice: EYES AND EARS ARE POOR WITNESSES WHEN THE SOUL IS BARBAROUS.

Above all this sits a rather curious creation. To us it looked like a bison head atop three books of justice placed on a helmet. Nearby was a shield of armor with (presumably) the scales of justice and a scroll-laced with a flower. Someone, we were later told, actually designed this as the state

We would be the last to get in a political debate with Nebraska, so we end our tour with the good advice from Seneca inscribed on the room's south side: THE WORLD HAD PERISHED HAD NOT PITY SET BOUNDS TO WRATH

is breathtaking. Courage, Magnanimity, Perseverance, Vision, Enterprise, Hospitality, Understanding and Righteousness are the eight characteristics depicted on the ceiling. Some cynics might say they've rarely reached the floor.

seal, but the legislature can't go along. Perhaps no one understood it. The scope of virtues displayed in the Governor's Reception Room