

History of the Greater Kansas City Science & Engineering Fair

Early in 1952 the Kansas City Museum, under the direction of Charles Wilder and The Kansas City Star, sponsored the first science fair in Kansas City. It was held at the Kansas City Museum from April 19 to April 25, 1952, and attracted 11,000 visitors. At that time, each exhibit was entered into just one of three categories: physical sciences, physiographical sciences, or biological sciences. The fair was managed by the museum staff and volunteers. Chief judge of the exhibits was Leo J. Roedl, who later became executive director of Science Pioneers. There were 393 exhibits on display.



C. G. "Pete" Wellington, executive editor of The Kansas City Star, and sponsor of the first Greater Kansas City Science Fair, in 1952. (Photo courtesy of The Kansas City Star.)

It was apparent by 1955 that changes were needed if the science fair was to survive and the board of governors of the Kansas City Museum voted to seek other sponsors. That decision laid the foundation for Science Pioneers, Inc., a nonprofit organization developed to foster science education and encourage interest in science and engineering with students in the Greater Kansas City area. Dr. Charles N. Kimball, president of Midwest Research Institute (now MRIGlobal), was contacted by museum leaders. After discussions with Pete Wellington, executive editor of The Kansas City Star, it was agreed that MRI and The Kansas City Star would sponsor the 1956 fair.



Dr. Charles N. Kimball, president of Midwest Research Institute, gathered a small group of interested individuals to ensure the future of Kansas City's science fair. Out of their efforts was born Science Pioneers, Inc.

1957 was the first fair under the auspices of Science Pioneers and they managed to quadruple the number of projects from the first fair in 1952, up from 400 to 1,603 entries. A record number of visitors — 31,602 — viewed the 1957 fair. A national fair official commented that Kansas City had the biggest and best-managed fair in the country. Grand Award projects in this decade included:

- Determination of the Charge of and Electron from the Miliken-Stokes (Joanne Holbert)
- Protein Antibody Relationship During Streptococcal Infections (George Marchin)
- A New Angle on Bubbles (Richard Copaken)
- Chromotography Reveals Essential Amino Acids (Virginia Bohnert)

1963 was the first time a Kansas City entrant, Vernice Marie Murray, took 1st place at the International Science Fair. She was a senior at Lincoln High School and her project was titled *Experimental Methods of Verifying Force*.



The largest fair in history was the 14th Greater Kansas City Science Fair in 1965. There were 1,924 exhibits with 39,949 visitors. The large number of projects had presented an almost impossible task for the judges. Schools were encouraged to hold run-off fairs and priority acceptance was given to student projects that received a first or second place in a run-off fair. There were over 100 run-offs by 1967.

In 1970, an effort was made to focus more on the quality rather than the quantity of the projects entered, due to ever-increasing submissions. Grades K-3 were eliminated from the Greater Kansas City Fair and were encouraged to enter school and district fairs. In 1974, the first group projects were allowed in the senior division.

In 1982, the name of the fair changed to the Greater Kansas City Science & Engineering Fair. In 1985, non-experimental projects were eliminated from competition, such as the ever-criticized baking soda volcano demonstration.

1988 was a year of firsts. The fair was held for the first time in Bartle Hall. Science Pioneers president Linda Segerbrecht solicited the first Science Fair corporate sponsorships. This fair was the first to include inventions as a category. After a 20-year absence, the banquet honoring science fair winners was reinstated through funding from the Hallmark Corporate Foundation and the Francis Family Foundation.

In the 1990's, computer usage made a large impact in statistical analysis of results and graphed data presentations on project display boards. Judges continued to work in teams, a practice begun in 1989. Judges came from consultants, attorneys, businessmen with science backgrounds, architects, zoo directors, governmental employees, and accountants. Many judges have served 35 years or more.

The Greater Kansas City Science & Engineering Fair celebrated its 50th fair in 2001 with a special reception and tour of student projects. The fair moved from Bartle Hall in 2003 to a one-time venue of the Overland Park Convention Center. The 2004, 2005, and 2006 fairs found a new home at Union Station where Science Pioneers had its offices. In 2007, the fair returned to Bartle Hall for one year to allow Union Station the room for an upcoming exhibition. It returned to Union Station in 2008 and has made its home there ever since.

In July of 2016, Union Station Kansas City merged with Science Pioneers, blending complementary science-based events, activities, and programs into a unique powerhouse with a mission to create a STEM-strong community. The traditions and values of the Greater Kansas City & Engineering Fair continue to be upheld to this day through the tireless efforts of the Union Station STEM Programming staff, dedicated judges, executive committees, champion teachers and students. MRIGlobal remains as platinum sponsor for the fair, and each year 4 grand award winners are sent to the International Science & Engineering Fair, just as they were decades ago.