



The St. Louis Convention

ANN MANHEIMER

That St. Louis is centrally located is well known; that it houses a new and, by most reports, excellent convention center is also widely recognized; that it is the home of the Gateway Arch, the third-most-attended man-made attraction in the United States, likewise is no secret. Nevertheless, according to meeting planner Sylvia Rottman, the city is still a surprise.

"They call it 'surprising St. Louis,' and it really is," testifies the administrative assistant of meeting services for the 28,000-member Association of Operating Room Nurses, which held its March 1979 convention in St. Louis. "Perhaps because St. Louis does not sound like an exotic location, I did not expect to like the city. But when I arrived for our first planning meeting, I noticed that parts of the countryside resembled areas of France, with its green grass and rolling hillsides. The Mississippi River makes it even more exciting." During the meeting itself, she met with more pleasant surprises: "The people and the city itself contributed to the success of our convention. The citizens were very willing to please and seemed happy we were there. Cabdrivers were extremely polite, and the staffs in all the hotels we used — from management down to service personnel — were very helpful. We have not received more cooperation anywhere than we did in St. Louis."

Jerry Bedford, Director of Convention Promotion for the Convention and Vis-

itors Bureau of Greater St. Louis, outlines what he sees as the major reasons for selecting St. Louis as a convention site: "First, we are in the center of the country, which is particularly important during the current energy crunch. Second, we house a number of Fortune 500 companies, which makes it easier for local members of many associations to become involved in national conventions. Moreover, we have an excellent convention center as well as several good hotels. And we are planning additions in both the downtown area and in St. Louis County.

"From another point of view, it is important to ask where the convention attendee stops and the tourist starts — the answer is as soon as he walks out the door of his hotel. St. Louis has certainly proved itself to be a good tourist attraction. More than five million people visit each year, a great percentage of whom are attracted by the arch, which has become a real symbol of the West."

Attracting Conventions

Such sites have been drawing conventions to St. Louis in increasing numbers. According to Bedford, the city hosted 286 conventions in 1973 for a gross value of \$40 million; in 1978, it hosted 494 conventions for a gross value of \$98 million. The latter figure might have been even greater, he notes, were it not for the current boycott of states that have not ratified the Equal Rights Amendment. "To say that the boycott has not hurt us would be untrue. While the actual cancellation of confirmed meetings has been minimal, we have had a number of tentative agree-

ments on the books that were canceled because Missouri has not ratified the ERA. And there is no way of knowing how many associations might have considered St. Louis were it not for the boycott." Nevertheless, he is optimistic about future business. "We are confident that by the mid-1980s, we will be booking more than 600 conventions within a calendar year, not including corporate and small state meetings."

The feature that seems to attract most planners to St. Louis, at least the first time around, is its location. Situated within 500 miles of 83 million people, the city can attract a surprisingly large attendance. Such was the case with the Screen Printers Association International (1650 members), which held its September 1978 convention in St. Louis. "That meeting attracted the largest attendance we had ever had," recalls John M. Crawford, CAE, Executive Vice President of the association, who believes that "a good part of that attendance was due to the city's central location. With airfares as reasonable as they are now, I don't understand why a meeting on either the west or the east coast does not pull as much attendance from members on the opposite side of the country. They do, however, seem willing to go halfway. Being in the middle of the country helps."

The city's accessibility will be improved even further when the airport expansion

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currently under way is completed. "The luggage area has been updated, 32 new gates have been added, and more concourses are in the works," describes Bob Koebbe, Director of Visitor Promotion for the St. Louis convention bureau. There are, however, still more improvements on the books: "There are plans to extend all of the runways, the taxi areas are being improved, and all-weather gates will be added. The baggage area will also undergo further remodeling and will eventually be expanded to more than three times its current size. The work is approximately 1/3 complete now."

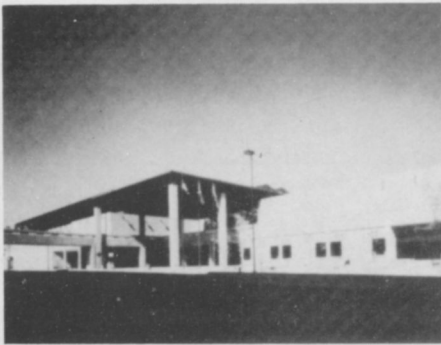
Perhaps because of these improvements and because of St. Louis's central location, many airlines have added new flights to the city, making it increasingly easy to get there. "Since the first of the

vention bureau's Bedford, "and offers good, spacious, bright exhibit areas. It is the only hall in the country that houses a post office. The meeting rooms are color-coordinated, and tickets can be printed to match them. There are two levels of meeting rooms, but all the halls are on one level. The lobby is spacious and has people movers rather than escalators." The cost, he adds, is "30¢ per square foot with a minimum of \$5000 for a typical three-day show with a three-day move-in, move-out. The meeting rooms are free when you're using one of the halls. For meeting rooms alone, there is a specific charge for each size room, ranging from \$50 to \$800."

According to Patrick E. Raleigh, Director of Membership and Convention Services for the 20,000-member American Society of Clinical Pathologists, the convention center is well worth the price. "It is just great — it left me with a fantastic impression. It provided us with most of the space we needed and with the convenience of having meeting rooms and exhibit halls all in one building. For our

dors. For our purposes, the St. Louis convention center is probably the best meeting facility in the country."

Carol Bennett, National Administrator for the National Office Machine Dealers Assn. (3000 members), which met in St. Louis in July 1978, says that the center is a "beautiful facility," but it still had problems that had to be worked out when she was there. For example, she points to a



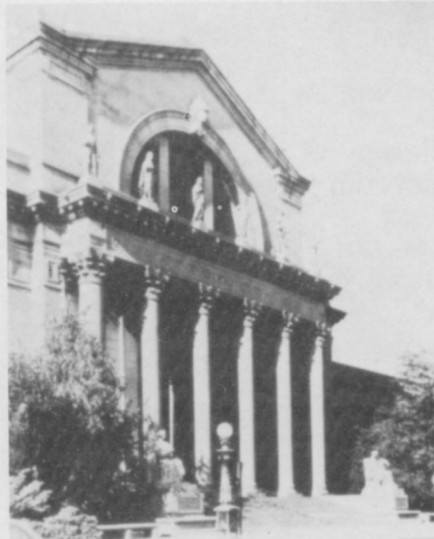
St. Louis's new convention center offers 44 meeting rooms and 240,000 square feet of space in three exhibit halls.

year, we have added probably close to a hundred new flights," says Koebbe. "And Northwest Orient as well as Texas International have begun flying to St. Louis. Moreover, St. Louis is the largest hub for the entire TWA system; more TWA flights go in and out of St. Louis than in any other city, including Chicago and all three airports in New York."

Convention Center

Twenty minutes from the airport is one of the city's major attractions, at least for meeting planners — its A.J. Cervantes Convention and Exhibition Center, named after one of the city's former mayors. Open in 1977, the center houses three exhibit halls of 80,000 square feet each; some 44 meeting rooms that can accommodate 15-2000 persons; full kitchen facilities, a cocktail lounge, and concessions; six covered truck doors that allow for either end or side loading, and unlimited floor load that permits trucks to drive directly onto the hall through five of the doors; individual air-conditioning controls for each area; and offices, a VIP room, and dressing, shower, and restroom facilities.

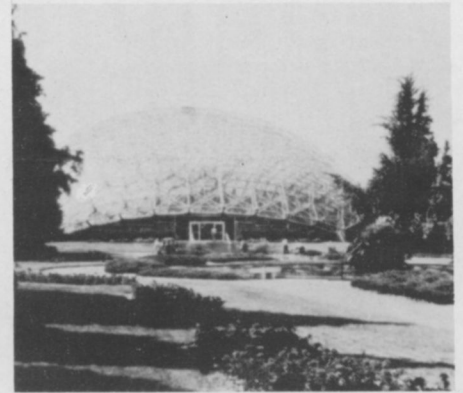
"It is an excellent hall," boasts the con-



The St. Louis Art Museum dates from the 1904 World's Fair, which attracted two million visitors to the city.

vention bureau's Bedford, "and offers good, spacious, bright exhibit areas. It is the only hall in the country that houses a post office. The meeting rooms are color-coordinated, and tickets can be printed to match them. There are two levels of meeting rooms, but all the halls are on one level. The lobby is spacious and has people movers rather than escalators." The cost, he adds, is "30¢ per square foot with a minimum of \$5000 for a typical three-day show with a three-day move-in, move-out. The meeting rooms are free when you're using one of the halls. For meeting rooms alone, there is a specific charge for each size room, ranging from \$50 to \$800."

"The meeting rooms are a good size and flexible. They are located just across the foyer from the exhibit facilities, so they are very convenient, but it is still possible to hold a relatively noisy exhibit while meetings are in session without disturbing the latter's attendees. There is plenty of room in the hallways and corri-



The Botanical Garden's Climatron is a geodesic-dome greenhouse that simulates four different climates.

problem she encountered on the first day of her exhibit: "The air conditioning in our section of the hall was not working. Our show includes computers and copy machines that must operate under dry conditions, and the humidity in the hall was just terrible. The temperature reached close to a hundred." She adds, however, that the staff handled the problem very well. "They quickly found the difficulty, but by the time the engineers and servicemen arrived, it was too late to salvage that day. We were fortunate that the other two halls were not in use and the staff was able to open the partitions to let us take advantage of the air in the surrounding halls. As a result, the attendance did not seem to suffer at all; people just kept going out for a breath of air. And the staff had the air conditioning working by opening time the next day."

Convention Bureau

The Screen Printing Association International solved the problem of lounge space with help from the convention bureau — help that John Crawford feels exemplifies the kind of service that the bureau provides. "The bureau has a trade-show booth of its own, specially constructed to look like a paddle boat, that is used at conventions to promote the city. I had seen it at the ASAE convention and decided to ask what the chances were of us using it as a lounge. The bureau loaned it to us at no charge; we had only to pay for having it erected and dismantled. We put it in the middle of the



Six Flags Over Mid-America offers the Screamin' Eagle, the world's fastest, longest, and tallest roller coaster.

exhibit floor, opened it to a more spacious size, put a few sofas on it, and had a lounge in the center of the trade show. It helped to contribute to the atmosphere of a meeting in St. Louis." And, he adds, so did the service provided by the bureau: "It's one of the best convention bureaus that I have worked with anywhere in the country."

Sylvia Rottman offers similar praise. "One particularly helpful service that the bureau provided was to assign one person to stay with the convention throughout the entire process — from booking through completion of the meeting itself. If, for instance, we came up against any kind of problem, rather than contacting the person or organization responsible for the difficulty, we could simply get in touch with our bureau contact, and he would smooth it out. This helped both diplomatically and with communications; it prevented long-distance explanations that can easily be misunderstood and provided us with a person right on the scene who knew our organization and our needs."

The bureau is some 70 years old and is funded primarily by a tourism tax on hotel rooms. Its first responsibility, as Bedford describes it, "is obviously to bring people in to look at St. Louis. Once the meeting is booked and confirmed, we meet with the planners to help them run a smooth convention. We have a staff of registration hostesses who work very closely with convention personnel, and we try to help out locally. We also provide a computerized housing service — in fact, we were the first bureau to go into computer housing."

That housing service is one of the reasons Rottman is so liberal with her praise of the bureau. "We do not use the convention housing office until the very end, when they help us with those who were not able to register in advance. In this instance, one hotel was not able to take a number of rooms that had been assigned

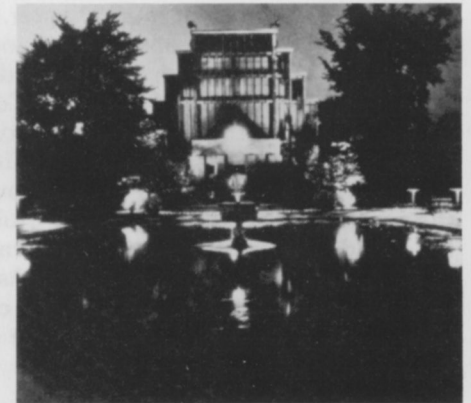
there. I found out about this on Monday, and everyone was due to arrive on Saturday. The woman in charge of housing immediately started calling other hotels in the area. It was very tight at the time; the city was practically sold out. But she kept digging and found a room here, a room there, and helped me to place all of the attendees. She also helped to compose the telegram to advise attendees that their rooms had been changed. As a result, we did not have a single bad comment; our members felt that we had done our best to take care of them."

Hotels

While planners are usually generous with their praise of the convention bureau and center, they seem somewhat less so in their praise of St. Louis's accommodations. The primary problem is apparently not so much with the hotels themselves as with their location. Says Patrick Raleigh: "We used the Chase-Park Plaza as our headquarters hotel because it could meet our need for suites. However, it is 5½ miles away from the convention center, and transportation turned out to be a headache. We set up a shuttle service with Bistate Busing, which was very good, but just getting on the bus and sitting through that long haul, particularly after a day of scientific courses, was less than ideal. It took anywhere from 20 to 40 minutes, depending on traffic, to return to the hotel. This meant that we had to use some staff time for transportation; when, for instance, some of the officers at the convention center had to be at a meeting at the headquarters hotel, the staff had to shuttle them."

Rottman encountered a similar problem but solved it by planning her housing arrangements very carefully. "We used more than 20 properties and that required a great deal of planning. We had to

go as far out as ten miles from the convention center, but we simply worked our shuttle buses around that. And since our nurses had to attend meetings at 7:00 in the morning, we tried to reserve the rooms nearest the convention center for them and housed our exhibit personnel in the farther hotels. We received a few complaints, but mostly the exhibitors agreed that the nurses needed to be closer; they were very philosophical about it. Our shuttle service also helped; we have used the same company for the past three years, and the staff knows our



The St. Louis Floral Conservatory or "Jewel Box" is located in the city's famed Forest Park, site of the 1904 World's Fair.

needs. Buses were scheduled in the downtown area at the peak hours of our meeting every ten to fifteen minutes; in the outlying areas, they ran every half hour to an hour."

The bureau is aware of the need for more hotel rooms closer to the convention center and expects the problem to be soon ameliorated. "As it stands now, we have approximately 4000 rooms in the downtown area," reports Bedford. "That is a sufficient number for many groups, but some won't even look at a city unless it meets a certain minimum number of rooms within five minutes' walking distance. With some of the planned additions to our hotel facilities, we are confident that we will soon be able to attract some of these groups. We are now planning additions that will give us about 3000 more hotel rooms throughout the county. Two major chains are seriously looking at the area around the convention center; we hope to make one announcement later this year and another in 1980. In addition, the Marriott Pavilion is doubling the size of its downtown hotel, which will give us an additional 400 rooms, and three more hotels are going up in the county for a total of close to a thousand more rooms. Another addition under discussion is a 500-room hotel to be located at the old Union Station, about five minutes from the center."



Three St. Louis attractions — Kiener Plaza, the fully restored Old Courthouse, and the Gateway Arch.

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