Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock

Under a Lucky Star

Search the Emporia State University campus on Google Earth and you will find a little surprise. Look carefully on the rooftop of our administration building and you will see, nestled flat in a cradle and patiently waiting for the next holiday season, a star. You have found the Plumb Hall star — a campus and community tradition since 1938.

If you are from Emporia or spent any time here as a student, you will immediately recognize the star. Like Santa at the end of the Christmas parade, the star on Plumb Hall is a regional icon. What most people don't know are the stories about our campus heroes who have cared for the star over the years.

The star stands 25 feet from roof top to tip and can be seen well to the south of town beyond the Cottonwood River and out into the Flint Hills. Campus electricians Robert Hankins and Herb Riggs are credited with building the first Plumb Hall star in 1938. We don't know why these two fellows were inspired to create the star, if it was their vision or that of others. It is possible they found inspiration from the town Christmas parade, which began in earnest in 1934, but was halted during World War II and not resurrected again until 1977.

Constructed of redwood and steel, the first star was lit in 1938 and shone for just three seasons before going dark on Dec. 7, 1941; it remained dark until 1945, when the end of World War II brought much to celebrate. Along with the return of the star, newspaper accounts tell of the campus decked out in strings of red, white and blue lights.

Since 1945, the star has not missed a single year. I am told it was a dangerous, difficult job requiring 20 or more men with grit and determination to hoist the star up each year. Campus folklore has it that one year the star was wrangled into place during an ice storm with a stiff north wind and one of the crew was nearly lost over the side of Plumb Hall.

During the 1980s it became clear the star was nearing the end of its life span. Physical Plant Supervisor Bruce Love recalled, "Our Facilities Director, Ray Notson, came to me and asked if I could build a new star to the exact specifications as the old and a little lighter and safer to hoist into place."

Love and his team of welders and electricians created an aluminum star and lift system that is still in use today. Stamped on the lower right arm of the star are the names of each man who worked on the new star and the date of completion — Oct. 5, 1989.

That same year, university President Robert Glennen, held the first lighting ceremony on record. Again, our campus heroes carefully scripted the lighting so that when the children from Butcher School threw the oversize light switch, the star would come to life. With carefully calibrated walkie-talkies, and a back-up radio for good measure, the star lighting countdown was as well-done as the famous Kansas City Country Club Plaza Lights, and I am told the children were beyond delighted at how the star twinkled.

And it wasn't just "magic in that old light switch," the children did indeed see twinkling. Our campus electrician, Al Ziesmer, found that if you start with 200 watts and move down the spectrum to about 25 watts before bumping back up to 200, the star will appear to twinkle.

Throughout the years many people have cared for not only the Plumb Hall star, but our campus and our students as well. Their dedication is inspiring, and I hope to share more of their stories with you in the new year ahead. Although it is a treat to find the star on Google Earth, the greater reward comes from knowing the campus champions, our employees, who keep such marvelous traditions alive.

Karen and I want to wish everyone a Merry Christmas and invite you to take a stroll on Commercial Street to see the Plumb Hall star and enjoy the holiday spirit of the Emporia community at this magical time of year. Let me know if you see the twinkle.

Michael Shonrock is the 16th president of Emporia State University, an undying optimist, and self-described futurist. He welcomes reader comments at adastra@emporia.edu