

Historical Society Of Pottawattamie County

Member Journal

Sample issue

Quick Takes

"Squirrel Cage Jail" 124 years old

Fewer than 18 revolving jails were ever built, and the one in Council Bluffs was the largest of all. The concept of a 90,000 pound, three-story iron cage being rotated by a single jailer turning a crank pushed the design to the limit, but it functioned as the county jail for 84 years. The jail is now a museum; members admitted free.

The "City of Depots" has just one left

Council Bluffs' many railroads called upon a variety of depots scattered throughout the city. Today only one remains in recognizable form. Society members can tour the Rock Island depot and outdoor rail car display free.

Model rail display

The metro area's only permanent model railroad that is open to the public is on display at the Society's RailsWest Museum. The trains run on a layout designed to look like Council Bluffs.

Historical Society Monthly Journal Brings Back Memories, Answers Questions

If Council Bluffs was a river town, why wasn't its downtown on the river? Who was Council Bluffs' first mayor, and why did he resign just a few weeks into office? When one Council Bluffs landmark burned to the ground in a spectacular fire, why were some of the spectators in tears but others wildly cheering? And just why does Broadway have that strange kink at Fourth Street?

These are just some of the questions our readers have asked that evolved into the fascinating stories delivered to members each month in the Society's *Member Journal*. Whether you consider history to be our pioneer settlers, the '52 flood, or as recent as Midlands Mall, you will find photos, stories, and memories to catch your interest. Local history isn't facts to memorize, it's the fascinating tales of real people right here where we live... some good, some bad, and some very strange.

Enjoy this sample issue, then join the Historical Society of Pottawattamie County and began receiving your own copy each month. In addition to museum admissions and the Member Journal membership also brings you access to special events and a Spring and Fall monthly lecture series. The series brings local and regional speakers to present programs on a wide variety of topics. A special members-only section of the website has an archive of past journals and periodic photos and displays.

You can learn more about the Society and what we are spotlighting on our website at www.TheHistoricalSociety.org.

Historical Trivia

What Council Bluffs business was known for its 15 foot chicken?

Answer is on page 7

Playland Park Drew Midwesterners to Council Bluffs

Playland Park began as the inspiration of two brothers from St. Joseph, Missouri; Abe and Louis Slusky. The Slusky brothers had experience in the amusement business, including for a time operating the concessions at Krug Park in Omaha and having their own amusement park — also called Playland Park — in Houston, Texas. Under the proposed plan Louis would remain in Houston to operate that park, with Abe in charge of the new park in Council Bluffs.

The original posting of the park's incorporation in the "legals" listed directors as Able Slusky and prominent local businessman Harry Cohen.

The firm bought 14 acres north of the Iowa approach to the Ak-Sar-Ben bridge from the Omaha and Council Bluffs Railway and Bridge company and leased additional land, a portion of Dodge Park, from the Frontier Association. The park was owned by the city but leased to the civic group Frontier Association for one dollar a year; Playland planned to pay the group \$8,000 for the sublease, money that the organization hoped to use to up-

grade the park. Included in the lease was a grand stand and race track; it was owned by the park but Playland would now have rights to use it except during the one week "Frontier Days" festival annually hosted by the Frontier group.

Much excitement was generated by the grand plan of the \$250,000 park slated to open Decoration Day, 1948, but not all approved. Sufficient protest was generated to the City Council in April, 1948, that the Council voted to force a halt to construction of the huge roller coaster. Some were concerned footings on land so near the river wouldn't be sound enough to support such a large structure; there were also concerns that the roller coaster passed over two city streets (40th and 41st Streets), and some neighbors were concerned about noise from the monster coaster being so near their homes. Others were concerned over the "Playland" name, noting the land deed stipulated the park carry the name of Susanna Dodge, wife of Nathan P. Dodge. The concerns were addressed, including use of both names on the neon sign, and the park opened with much fanfare.

and rides as one approached the parking lot made a memorable first impression to the visitors. Rides and attractions were modified and added over the years; some remembered favorites were the bumper cars, ferris wheel, crazy house with its strange mirrors, boat and auto rides for younger kids, and a spook house. There was "Pump It" with miniature railroad type flat cars mounted on rail track in which the rider pushed and pulled a t-shaped handle to make the car move. One tale has it "The Bullet" was a favorite of park employees because they got to keep whatever change flew out of the riders' pockets onto the ground during the ride.

In addition to the amusement rides the owners developed the Dodge Park race track. In 1949 it was converted from a dirt dog track to a paved midget auto track; in 1952 the track was adapted for modified stock cars.

Racing fans adopted the park as a favorite for its track, crediting owner Abe Slusky for constantly keeping up with innovations that kept the racing up-to-date and fresh; they remember the stands being packed most of the time.

A news report in 1963 quotes Abe Slusky as saying he was aware of the proposed new interstate bridge to replace the Ak-Sar-Ben but hoped that if it cut off any Playland land they could double up their amusements on the remaining property and continued business as usual; "we have no plans to relocate."

(Continued next page)



The park appeared to prosper and grow. The signature feature remained the huge roller coaster, with three humps, rising to 60 feet on the first incline, and going right over two city streets. Indeed driving under this roller coaster and then seeing all the lights, games,

"Playland Park", continued...

Just a few months later it was confirmed it was more than "a little" land the bridge and access ramps to it would claim; the project would take two thirds of the land on which Playland operated, including the item most associated as synonymous with the park—the big roller coaster. Playland Incorporated appealed the condemnation but lost. The famed roller coaster came down in 1964.

While the new bridge was a setback, it wasn't the end; though the park went from 60 acres to 20 it reopened with 12 rides on the remaining land. A new but smaller roller coaster—the Wild Mouse (with painted nose and round ears on the front of each coaster car)— was added.

Loss of the prominent old roller coaster and the torn up roads from construction of the new bridge and ramps made many think the park was

not open, business fell off and the rack track closed for two years. The track reopened in 1966 featuring races with modified coupes and recaptured many of its fans.

Abe Slusky died of a heart attack at the age of 59 in August of 1970. It was decided after that to concentrate just on the track, and all of the remaining rides were taken out and shipped to "Frontier City" in Oklahoma City, a park the Slusky brothers had purchased in 1969. Playland reopened in 1971 but just for race fans; for the first time there were no amusement rides. As one of the few asphalt tracks of its kind in the region Playland continued to attract racers and race fans until the track was closed in 1977. The site is a city park today.

(Story by Richard Warner)



Bluffs' School Named After Civic Leaders, Educators and Businessmen

Some Bluffs schools are named for the streets they are on or presidents. Others hold the names of prominent local citizens.

Rue School carries the name of James B. Rue. Mr. Rue came to Council Bluffs in 1853 to start a private school and later served as principal of Washington School from 1873 until 1877. The original Rue building was erected in 1923 with a three room addition in 1956. Rue remains in use today.

Peterson School was named for Justice Henry K. Peterson of the Iowa Supreme Court. Mr. Peterson, a local attorney, was born in Council Bluffs and lived in the city's south end. The school was built in 1958 and was one of five schools closed in 1986. Council Bluffs' Peterson Park on South 8th Street is also named for Henry K. Peterson.

Gunn School takes its name from Levi Gunn, a fruit and cattle farmer who homesteaded 39 acres where the school now sits. The original school was built in 1880, the current building in 1924.

Myers School opened in 1957 and closed in 1986. Mr. Myers was principal of three Bluffs' grade schools over the years and principal of Thomas Jefferson High School from 1922 to 1952. He also served as assistant superintendent of schools.



Laurel Langdon and Hardy?

Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Frank Capra, Stan Laurel, Oliver Hardy. All names from the silent film era and early days of talking pictures that are instantly recognizable to most everyone. Curiously, if one looks back at the entertainment news and reviews from that time, another name figures in with as much or even more prominence as the rest... Council Bluffs' Harry Langdon.

He has a star on Hollywood Boulevard, and any serious cinema buff would know his work, but the last 30 years Harry Langdon's name hasn't always enjoyed the ready recognition status of his peers.

Though sometimes thought of as a silent film star, his career certainly did not end with that era. Fully two thirds of Langdon's pictures were actually talkies. He was a contemporary of Laurel and Hardy and worked as a writer on a number of their movies.

In 1939, following some problems with Stan Laurel during filming, Langdon was paired with Oliver Hardy for a picture. Rumors ran rampant through the entertainment industry that Laurel was out and Langdon was in. In actuality only one Langdon and Hardy picture emerged, a quirky comedy called "Zenobia" that can still be seen on

late night television, but Langdon's name at time was easily big enough to make the rumor believable.

Harry Langdon was born in Council Bluffs in 1884. His father, William, was a successful house painter. Performing was in young Harry's blood from the beginning. As a preteen he staged neighborhood theatrical productions of his own creation, and was typically the winner of any sort of talent competitions in town. In his early teens he ran off to join "Dr. Belcher's Kickapoo Indian Medicine Traveling Show." He returned to Council Bluffs, but over the next few years would frequently leave for long stretches on the road as a part of various minstrel shows and circuses.

Harry Langdon had the necessary talent and persistence. He soon worked his way to the top of the vaudeville circuit as a big name headliner and appeared on Broadway in the musical "Jim Jam Jems." When he decided to get into pictures, he landed a contract easily, and within two years had vaulted to the top of silent comedy stardom. Advent of the talking pictures didn't pose a career barrier, with Langdon signing to do a series of short comedies with a major studio in 1929. Ads for the new pictures hailed Harry as having "a comic manner of speech that is irresistibly funny." He continued to make movies throughout the rest of his life.



Harry Langdon became a star of silent pictures but continued to be featured in talking films as well.

Motion picture history buffs have begun to debate what to attribute the relative obscurity of his name in recent years.

Some say it is a classic case of an actor putting his career into his own hands. The onset of his box office downslide was coincident with his move to the director's seat. Or could there even be some Hollywood politics involved? The director he fired was Frank Capra, who went onto become a Hollywood legend. Some hold this move angered the Hollywood mighty and he paid the price.

Others attribute the decline to overexposure. He had seven features released within two years, more than twice the that of his contemporary stars.



Council Bluffs actor Harry Langdon is honored with a star on Hollywood Boulevard's Walk of Fame.

Perhaps the most compelling idea to explain his relative obscurity is one Mr. Langdon could have understood completely. He committed the worst mistake a vaudevillian could make— his timing was off. He died too early.

Buster Keaton lived long enough to be rediscovered by a new audience at the Cannes Film Festival. Chaplan and Lloyd received belated Oscars. Laurel and Hardy found new fans via television. But Harry Langdon died in 1944, too early to enjoy the rebirth of his style of comedy. Signs are the recognition is slowly returning, however. Amongst film buffs his name is seen more and more frequently when that era is being discussed. In the late 1990's the Harry Langdon Society formed and distributed information and stories about the comic genius. Of course for Council Bluffs residents the renaming of a major thoroughfare in his honor is a daily reminder of a local boy who had a dream and made it come true.

(Story by Richard Warner)

Trivia Answer from Page 1-

Cervs Provided Miniature Golf, Driving Range

The "big chicken" on the South Omaha Bridge Road at Cervs Miniature Golf Course and Driving Range was a memorable landmark for children. The chicken is gone, a victim of the changing landscape along that route. Development also claimed the regions last drive-in theater.



(Above and below) Cervs Miniature Golf; photos by Barb Warner.



1948 Brought First Parking Meters

Most motorists would rather it have been just an April Fools Day prank when Council Bluffs inaugurated its first parking meters April 1, 1948.

A first day check found drivers abandoning the prime parking spots on Broadway, jamming instead into meter-free areas on side streets and around Bayliss Park. A check at 10:15 a.m. showed only one car in the metered zone. Motorcycle officer E. E. Wingers reported issuing four tickets on his first overtime parking patrol but passed by some meters that motorists hurried out of stores to plug when they saw him pull up. The pay-for-parking program got off to a rocky start when 29 of the meters were damaged by vandals before they were even put into use.

THEN AND NOW



Upper- *There's not much that hasn't changed at the intersection of Oak Street and Broadway. In the mid 1960's the corner was home to Herrin's Standard Oil Station (not pictured), Johnson Pharmacy, and Safeway grocery store. By the time this photo was taken Johnson Pharmacy occupied the entire building at 919-917 East Broadway but prior to this it had been home to separate businesses, usually a drug store and grocery store. Some of the occupants included McLaughlin and Son Grocers, Joe Spaulding drugs, Basil Miller drugs, and Arthur Norgard groceries. Mr. Norgard continued to operate a successful grocery business even after the much larger Safeway store opened next door by offering delivery, credit, and warmly greeting his customers in Danish. He joked that Safeway was his "warehouse" if one of his customers requested an item he didn't have in stock. The "now" photo inset shows the Jennie Edmondson hospital parking lot in the foreground and parking garage in the background.*

Lower- *The Hughes Block at 201 West Broadway became Danish Hall in 1900 and the new home for the Danish Brotherhood, Danebo, Danish Social Society and associated auxiliaries. At the time there were almost 5,000 Danish immigrants and their descendents in town. The Danish Brotherhood was originally composed of veterans of the wars over Schleswig-Holstein while the Danebo, organized in Council Bluffs in 1878, required that all meetings be conducted solely in Danish. The photograph also shows "Suzibelle" which inspired a long-running court battle between city officials and Lyle's Discount Tires until 1991 when Judge Heath decided that she did not violate any city ordinance but was "more or less a work of art."*

("Then" photos taken from the book "Council Bluffs: Broadway;" "Now" photos courtesy of Barb Warner).



Trucking Industry Giant Started in Council Bluffs

A number of businesses spawned in Council Bluffs have grown well beyond the borders of the city. A firm that started with just one driver-- the owner himself-- and grew into a company with over a billion dollars in revenue in just a few decades would have to be right at the top of the city's success list.

Clarence Werner grew up on a farm near Peterson, Nebraska. Keeping farm equipment running required endless ingenuity and creativity, and young Werner, who proved to be quite mechanically inclined, developed an appreciation of vehicles and equipment working with the farm gear.

After leaving his parents' farm Werner moved to Council Bluffs to start his own business. In 1956 he sold his only car to buy a gas-powered Ford F800 truck and began hauling freight. The industry at that time was heavily regulated by the government and he had to restrict his loads to low-end cargo that was exempt from regulatory restrictions like grain, watermelon, feed, and fence posts.

Though having to build a business with just low paying freight had its obvious disadvantages, it forced the successful to learn to keep their costs low and service standards high. C.L. Werner proved a master at this, and the business began to grow, one truck at a time, covering a five to six state region. The company built a new terminal in 1965 at 805 32nd Avenue in Council Bluffs, at that time boasting a fleet of ten trucks. The familiar blue color came in 1969 with adoption of the logo a short time later. The 32nd Avenue terminal was enlarged in 1970.

Werner had found a niche in the freight transportation industry and was serving it well. The early 70's saw more growth, including the acquisition of 35-40 truck flatbeds with removable sides to haul grain, soybean meal, lumber, potatoes, and produce and the addition of seven van trailers.

In 1975 a state sales tax exemption for Iowa based trucking firms expired, creating an unfavorable business environment for transportation companies. Council Bluffs was among the forefront in a move to reinstate the exemption. Chamber of Commerce President Mike Dugan warned legislators that the state would lose good trucking firms unless action was taken. Clarence Werner, whose



company by then had 90 employees and an annual 1.1 million dollar payroll in Council Bluffs, explained such taxes were particularly hard on companies in border cities. Shipping rates were federally set, so Iowa firms couldn't recover the revenue by passing costs onto customers, and even if they could they wouldn't be able to compete with Nebraska enterprises who didn't have the additional costs. Chamber president Dugan cautioned that the Iowa economy would ultimately suffer by forcing western Iowa companies to relocate in Nebraska where they could operate more competitively. The company remained in Council Bluffs for another two years but ultimately did move to Nebraska in 1977 when a major fuel tax increase was proposed in Iowa.

The relocation to Nebraska afforded an opportunity to expand facilities and a 30,000 square foot terminal was built on 5 acres along Highway 50 in Sarpy County to house the company's 100 trucks. By 1989 the company that started in Council Bluffs with just one lone truck less than 35 years earlier was named by Forbes Magazine as one of the Top 200 Small Business Firms in the United States.

In 1997 the company expanded again, this time to a 150 acre site on the East side of Highway 50 along Interstate 80. In addition to its strong growth the company has positioned itself as a leader in industry technology, installing satellite communications on trucks as early as 1992 and a paperless log system in 1998.

Today Werner Enterprises ranks as one of the largest firms of its kind in the United States with revenue of nearly 1.5 billion dollars. The company today employs over 1,500 in the metro area and 12,500 nationwide.

(Story by Ryan Roenfeld; photo courtesy Werner Enterprises)

As It Was...



(At left) The buildings at Fourth Street and Broadway at the right side of the photo remain today much as they were in this photo from 1970. The distant spire of St. Peters Church is the lone landmark lingering today of the portion of West Broadway toward the center of the photo.



(Left) Washington School as it appeared in 1950. This site today is a playground; the original steps remain. (Below) Rudy's Drive In (later DJ's) was a popular stop at 1905 West Broadway.



(Above) Locomotive in the Union Pacific yard in 1960. (Right) City water works building on Bryant in 1969.

