

Historical Society Of Pottawattamie County

Member Journal

September/October 2015

From Home Brew Laughing Gas to Implants and Transplants: The History of Healthcare in CB

The evolution of pioneer medicine to modern care is full of intriguing curiosities. Sunday, November 8, at 2 pm, the Historical Society of Pottawattamie County examines the rusty knives and toothsome tales of local medical and dental history. This entertaining program will tell of the first-ever of the mobile military hospitals (later called MASH units) that was mustered in Council Bluffs, how the city's first hospital resulted from an unwed pregnant wom-

an in the city jail, as well as of the town's medical college that misplaced its cadavers but never graduated a single student and more. Artifacts from Mobile Hospital #1 will be on display as well as other early medical items from the Historical Society's collections. Information for the presentation is drawn from a variety of sources including the extensive research of late HSPC member Richard Petersen into the creation and operation of Mobile Hospital #1 and local medical history information collected by former HSPC board member Dr. James Knott, MD and published in his book **Gateway to the West**.

The program will be presented by Daily Nonpareil Managing Editor John Schreier, Historical Society Museums Coordinator Carla Borgaila, oncologist/hematologist Dr. Robert Warner, and dentist Dr. Richard Warner. The program will be held at The Center, 714 South Main Street; admission is free. Hy-Vee dietitian Kelsey Engels will be serving complementary tasty but healthy refreshments even your doctor and dentist will approve of!

Celebrate Halloween with Haunted History Tours

Join us for a slightly creepy history-filled evening tour of the "Squirrel Cage" jail October 24 and 30. Tours start at 6, 7, and 8 pm; admission is five dollars per person.

On Halloween bring your kids to the "Squirrel Cage" jail for a different kind of trick-or-treat. Inmates will be handing out plenty of candy from the cells. Admission is two dollars per child.

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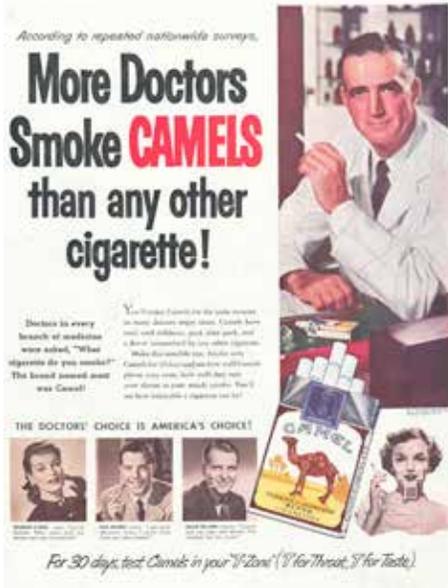
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Not every bit of medical advice has stood the test of time. Learn more of the curious quirks that make up the history of health care in the upcoming talk November 8. See the details on page 1.

Feedback From Our Readers...

HSPC member Carol Burhenne writes:

Just finished reading the Historical Journal for Summer - very interesting articles and as usual the pictures were great. Loved the picture of the Omaha and Council Bluffs Railway and Bridge, in particular.

It brought back so many memories of riding the streetcar to Omaha as a kid. Many Saturdays my mother would take Rosemary and myself to Omaha and we would have lunch at Kresges on 16th and Harney and then go to the Orpheum across the street. They would have a movie and a stage show and we saw many of the popular bands of that era - Benny Goodman, Harry James, Tommy Dorsey, etc. My father had his garage open on Saturdays because many of the farmers came to town then, so it was kind of a "girls day out".



Crowd Turns Out for Jail Birthday

The Historical Society threw a party to commemorate the 130th anniversary of the opening of the "Squirrel Cage" Jail and a whole lot of people came. Volunteers were stationed throughout the building as guests wandered through at their own pace. HSPC President Mariel Wagner said she was very pleased with the turnout, which provided an opportunity for many people that had never been inside the building to get a glimpse at this one-of-a-kind oddity. Many of the first-time visitors expressed interest in returning for a regular guided tour.

Strong Interest in Society Museums at "Teacher's Night"

1500 teachers educators from throughout the metro area turned out for "Teacher's Night" at Durham Western Heritage Museum. The annual event is intended to show teachers what local historical attractions have to offer that might be relevant to their students. HSPC Museums Coordinator Carla Borgaila represented the Society at the three hour event and said information about our museums drew a great deal of interest amongst the attendees.



From the Newspaper,
1904...

Fairmount Park's Birth

Eight Fawns and a Baby Elk Have Been Added to the Zoo Recently.



The zoo at Fairmount park is being rapidly increased of its own accord, as shown by reports at the meeting of park commissioners Tuesday evening. Eight fawns have been added to the happy family of deer in the park, and there are six happy mothers at the park. Two of them were so fortunate as to give birth to twins, which fact accounts for differences in the number of fawns and mothers. The new arrivals have all come within the past two weeks, and are in the best of health and spirits.

A baby elk, the third from the pair in the park, has also come into the world, but with it has arisen discord of the most violent character between its parents. The newcomer is not two weeks old, having been born June 10. Strangely enough, it is a female and was born on the same relative date that its two sisters were born, June 10, 1902, 1903, and 1904 being the three birthdays. Three daughters have been born to the parents, no sons being recorded. As in the other two summers the mother has issued strict orders that none of the family shall go near the baby but herself. This week there have been several encounters when the father tried to overstep the rules, but he has had to surrender each time, and is patiently waiting for the time when he may become acquainted with his offspring. Last summer he received a blow from his jealous spouse which lamed him to such an extent that he could scarcely walk for several weeks.

President Graham has been in correspondence looking toward the purchase of a pair of black swans, but the price of \$75 which is asked is considered too high. The quoted price of white swans is \$60. So far as is known few black swans are kept in any of the western parks, but as Mr. Graham expressed it, "What want in a park is what somebody else hasn't got." Fairmount park already has many different species of animals, besides the deer and elk, including scores of rabbits and birds.



Yesterday afternoon the members of the park commission made a trip to Island park to study its condition with a view of making such improvements as are considered necessary. They visited Lake View park Monday and reported it is in a flourishing condition.

(Contributed by HSPC member Mary Lou McGinn)

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 the rest of his life.

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 down-slide 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 be-

“Langdon and Hardy”, continued...

come 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.

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 re-naming of a major thoroughfare in his honor is a daily reminder of a local boy who had a dream and made it come true.



The Landon Legend Not Without Misadventures

Though it seems to have escaped mention when Harry Langdon entertained Hollywood reporters, the New Dohaney Opera House wasn't the only Council Bluffs venue where he spent some time as a young man. There was also that time in the “Squirrel Cage” jail.

History researcher Danette Hein-Snider provided a newspaper microfilm dated November 22, 1901 that makes reference to Mr. Langdon serving time in the county jail awaiting transfer to the state penitentiary in Fort Madison for a fifteen month sentence. The news account also noted that Governor Shaw might parole the young man before the move.

Biographers Chuck Harter and Michael Hayde have noted that young Harry and his brothers were more adventuresome than they law allowed during their time in Council Bluffs. In 1896 Harry and another young man were arrested for robbing a grocery store. In 1898 Harry, who was working as a vendor of the *Bee* newspaper was accused of assaulting a fellow newsboy. He also was fined ten dollars for disturbing the peace on another occasion. During the same period his brothers were arrested for stealing chickens and throwing a brick through the window of the Creston House hotel, though brother Charles claimed he was aiming at a stray dog but missed.

(Danette Hein-Snider is Membership and Special Projects Coordinator for the General Dodge House; Chuck Harter and Michael J. Hayde are authors of “Little Elf- A Celebration of Harry Langdon.)

(Photo at left) Harry Langdon's father was a painter by trade but became active in the Salvation Army, rising through the ranks to become a captain. He started a mission in the small single-story building picture just left of the Ogden Hotel.

As It Was...



The Mandarin Tourist Village was ready to provide the traveler on the Lincoln Highway with just about anything they might need. Though difficult to see in the photo the two women at the left are standing under a sign that reads "Cafe." Gasoline pumps are in the center between the motel units. The Mandarin survived at 3303 West Broadway into the early 1970s by which time the interstate highways had taken tourist traffic around the outskirts of town. By this time a residential trailer park had been added to the south side of the property.

Arby's Restaurant occupies this site today.



Council Bluffs' second hospital got its start in the former home of beer brewer Conrad Geise, which can be identified on the right hand side of the photo. The photo upper right shows St. Bernard's Hospital in 1980. Nursing school graduates line the steps of Mercy Hospital in the picture at right. These photos and many more will be part of the upcoming presentation on the history of local healthcare November 8.

See page one for more details.



The two story building that once occupied the corner of East Broadway and Benton Street is remembered by long term residents at Olmsted Grocery. It was actually erected to serve as the offices and bottling operation of the Wheeler-Herald soft drink company. When C.A. Olmsted purchased the building in 1908 was serving as a fruit depot for the Council Bluffs Grape Growers Association. Mr. Olmsted operated a produce depot there, buying from local farmers and hauling the vegetables to a market in Omaha by horse cart. He eventually started selling animal feed to the farmers that gathered there, and in 1938 added grocery sales as well.



The entire building was lowered four feet in the 1920s to allow customers to enter without climbing steps. The procedure involved supporting the building with jack screws, removing the foundation, and setting the building onto a new foundation. Mr. Olmsted retired in 1967 at the age of 83; the building was sold and torn down.

The photo at left appeared in the book "Images of America: Council Bluffs" last year with the caption, "Three unknown strikers are pictured picketing the Illinois Central railroad in Council Bluffs on April 9, 1964 after four of five unions representing Illinois Central employees went on strike over work rules. The strike against the Illinois Central was memorable as it threatened to end America's supply of bananas, almost all of which were shipped from New Orleans by the railroad."



We now have a little more information. Anthony Caruso of Council Bluffs recognized the man in the middle to be his father, Paul T. Caruso.

Interested in Streetcars? We Have Something for You!

In 1996 streetcar history buff Richard Orr wrote the definitive book about Council Bluffs and Omaha streetcars. Even if you've never ridden one the tale of how they evolved and shaped the growth of the metro area is fascinating.

Streetcars of Omaha and Council Bluffs has hundreds of photographs, many of them of interest not only because of the streetcar in the picture but of the neighborhoods in the background.

The Historical Society has acquired a supply of these books and now has them for sale in the gift shops. The current price of \$20 is a fraction of the original retail price of this 348 page hard bound book. Some copies have been signed by the author, who passed away a few years ago. It's not too early to be thinking about Christmas; this book might be that perfect unique gift for someone on your list.

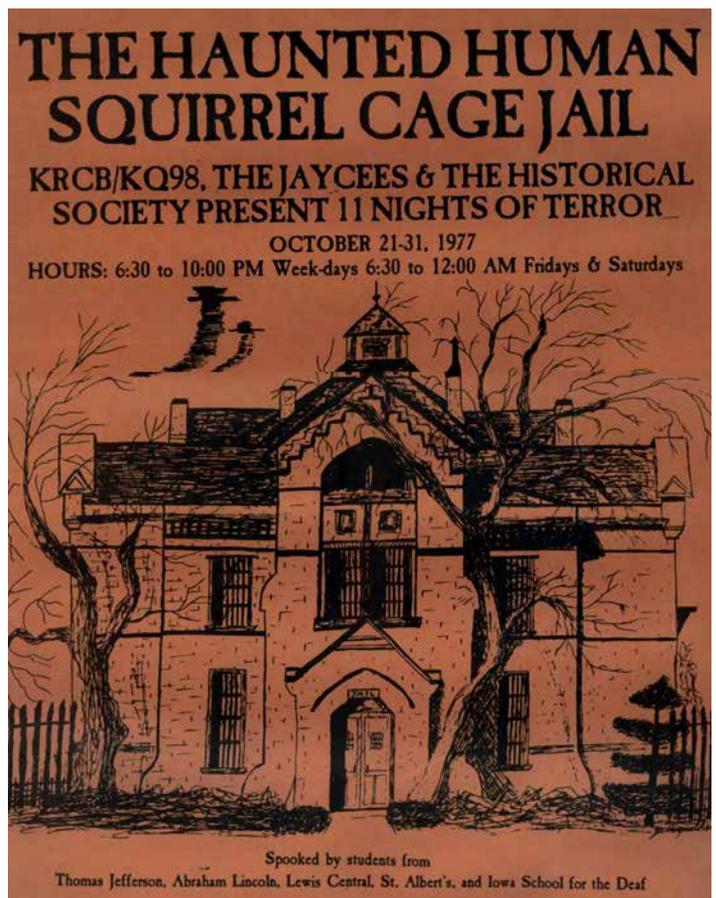
Though you could have ridden one as late as 1955 in Omaha the era of the streetcar in Council Bluffs came to a close September 25, 1948. As the fifty year franchise of the Omaha & Council Bluffs Railway and Bridge Company was about to expire the company offered to renew it for another thirty years.

Bluffs Mayor Phil Minner favored an all bus service. Two proposed bus companies, Council Bluffs Transit and Council Bluffs Coach, also vied for the contract. The matter was put to a public vote; Council Bluffs Transit emerged as the winner. The public voted with their patronage as well. In the final days when both were running parallel routes most of the streetcar customers promptly defected to the new, modern buses. The actual end of service in CB was unceremonious. The eighteen passengers of Car 875 thought they were headed for downtown Council Bluffs when it turned instead into the car barn at 28th and Avenue A. Fares were refunded and the passengers told to walk the block to Broadway and catch a bus to continue their journey.



Richard Orr's "Streetcars of Omaha and Council Bluffs" has several hundred photographs taken all over the metro area. Most are black and white, but some from Omaha are in color. The top photo shows a streetcar on Pearl Street in front of Beno's Department Store about ready to return to Omaha. The lower photo shows the Chief Theater, opposite South High School, in South Omaha. The book is now for sale in the Society's museum gift shops.

(At right) Using the “Squirrel Cage” jail as a home for Halloween festivities is nothing new. Indeed many visitors at the recent “Squirrel Cage” open house commented that their initial exposure to the building was from its days as a haunted house. The Society partnered with then Council Bluffs radio stations KRCB and KQ98 in 1977 and drew in thousands of visitors over an eleven day period. Though that level attendance wasn’t duplicated in subsequent years without the radio stations’ support the haunted house at the jail continued to be popular. Changes in fire codes and other safety considerations make a full fledged “haunted house” impractical today, but the season will still be celebrated at the jail with Haunted History Tours and Trick-or-treat on Halloween evening. See the story on page one for times and prices.



Last issue we published a story called *The Truman Troopers: A Historical Society Member’s Recollections of the Forgotten War* by Bill Christensen. Mr. Christensen sent along these photographs that relate to the story. Below is the Public Information Office of the 25th Inf Division which handled home town releases, as well as hosting the wire service correspondents from Rueters, taken at the crossing of the Jan River, going back North on & March 1951. The photo at left shows the international press corps. Mr. Christensen, a 1947 grad of ALHS, is second from the right in the back row of this 1951 photo.



FAIRMOUNT PARK, A HISTORY

Or, What You Never Knew About Our Park...

Fairmount Park is beginning its third incarnation as one of Council Bluffs' premier parks. Or maybe its fourth, if you count the Indians.

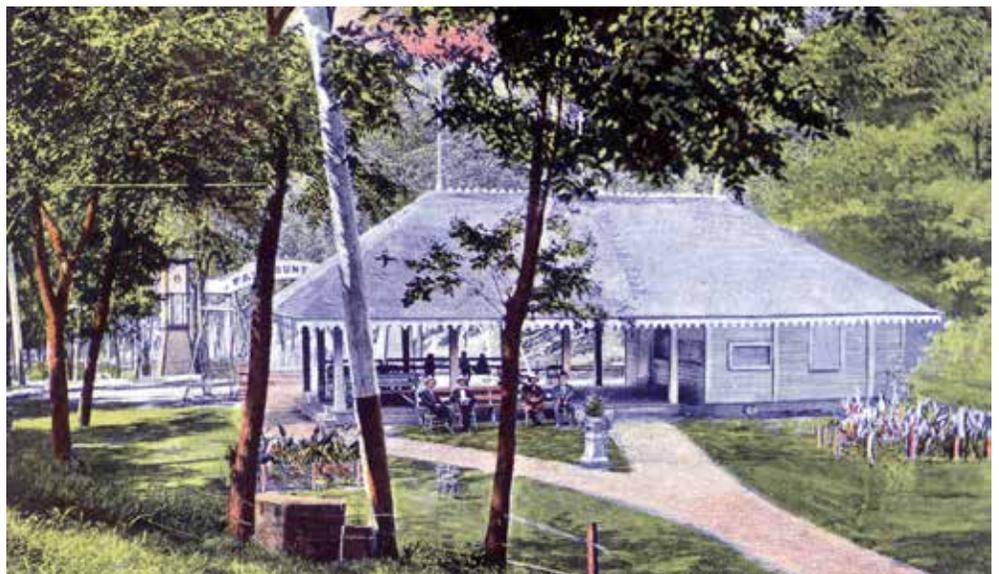
In the beginning, the Native Americans used its highest hill (now known as Lookout Point, or Dodge's Lookout Point) as a burial grounds. From beneath the ground here, at a depth of from four to ten feet, their skeletons and those of other early-day Americans were found. One skull had been estimated to be several thousand years of age. Flint arrow heads and other stone utensils were once found on the surface of the ground. Because this hill is higher than any hill within a radius of 200 miles, it probably seemed to these early natives to be a sacred place. These skeletons have long since disappeared but if today's sensitivity to such burial grounds had been practiced in those days, Fairmount Park would have had a far different history.

The hills were there when Lewis and Clark passed through. They were the running ground for wild animals before any white man set foot on them. Their hills and valleys, nooks and glens, weeds and brush struggled against the annual fires that swept them. In short, there had not been any material change in the landscape since the hills were thrown up by the swirling winds of the Missouri River valley when it stretched from hill to hill across the valley where Council Bluffs now lies, but that was about to change.

In the 1850's, this 90-acre tract of land was made a portion of the City. It was platted into lots by Edward Williams and was called Williams' second addition. Despite the fact that the hills were too steep and the roads too devious for use as building lots or farm ground, a skillful scam was perpetrated on gullible settlers

from the East, and for twenty years these lots were sold. Finally, the purchasers investigated and found they had been buying 45-degree slopes, unsuitable for building or farming. The taxes remained unpaid.

Enter Andrew Graham, a visionary who was chairman of the park board as well as a member of the city council. He was familiar with these hills, filled with towering walnut, elm and linn trees. A small portion of the property was at that time needed for a standpipe for the newly constructed water system (still in existence today and pumping strong). At the council meeting held in June, 1879, Mr. Graham outlined his plan for the purchase of the ground. A resolution was passed ordering condemnation proceedings. Back taxes were canceled and the land was appraised for \$1,553, which was the original and practically the total outlay for the land. Condemnation proceedings started into motion a series of legal battles in an attempt to stop the sale, which lasted into the 1890's. Despite these legal battles, the city was given title to the park ground in November, 1879. Within a few days, work was started trimming the trees and clearing the brush. The following spring, blue grass and clover were sown, and in March, 1880, the park was ready for visitors. Incidentally, Mr. Graham was instrumental in choosing "Fairmount Park" as



“Fairmount Park, A History,” continued...

the name for this beautiful but undeveloped area.

Although many hardy souls visited the park, it was plain that easy access had to be created. To enter the park at that time, a tortuous climb or a wide detour of the hills was necessary. Some grading was done and new roads cut into the grounds, and in 1887 the right-of-way for the street car line was secured. The city made the necessary cut through the hills for the tracks and the popularity of the park grew, but was the enjoyment of nature enough to entertain the Victorians?

No. They wanted more and they got it. Celebrations took place and even moving pictures were shown in the natural amphitheater in the east valley. Swan pond was created, so named for the white swans which swam there during the warm months. Mr. Graham tried to buy black swans for the pond but they were too expensive, so he settled for white. A zoo was installed, as well as a children’s playground, a pavilion was built, and benches for seating were strategically placed within the park. Many wells were drilled, with an automatic electrical pump at each well to furnish park visitors with excellent tasting water. This water was free to the public and hundreds of families living in that vicinity made daily trips to the wells in preference to city water. After considerable grading, miles of roadways were completed with wide turns suitable for automobiles. At some time during the park’s development, a giant California Redwood tree was shipped to the city in pieces and located near Lookout Point to designate its highest point. If the stump is still there, it has not been found.



Postcard view of giant redwood stump in Fairmount Park. The card is postmarked 1912.

Time marches on. The zoo was gone. The swans and their pond (in the center of which The Boy with the Boot had spouted water) were no more. The playground became obsolete. In fact, the popularity of the park faded as fewer and fewer visitors went there. Although the wide open spaces within the park continued to be maintained, the woods and pathways gave way to invasive trees, shrubs, weeds and trash. Time for another incarnation.

Nearby Fairmount Park Neighborhood Association adopted the Lookout Point portion of the park with the goal of cleaning out the accumulation of trash, large and small. In its first year, the volunteers carried out appliances, furniture, car parts and sundry smaller items by the truckload. As the years of clean-ups continued, less and less trash was found, a good thing, but nature was still slowly covering up whatever improvements remained. Fairmount Park called out for another visionary to see its potential once again. It found one when Larry Foster, the present head of the city’s parks department, and with the approval of a cooperative city council, went into action to renovate it for yet another generation. Work is now under way to remove the invasive trees and undergrowth that had threatened to obliterate the original beauty so captivating to our predecessors. A water park and children’s playground, a new lodge building, new artist-designed signage identifying the history of this great park, and many other improvements will soon restore the park to the public.

To quote directly from an early publication on parks in the city:

“Words cannot convey even the faintest conception of the grandeur and magnificence of Fairmount Park.”

Well said.

Sources: The Report of the Parks Commission, Renovation of Council Bluffs Parks System, published in 1914 by the Parks Commission.

(Story by Mary Lou McGinn and Sharon Babbitt. Ms. McGinn is an author and member of the Historical Society of Pottawattamie County; Ms. Babbitt is president of the Fairmount Park Neighborhood Association and edits their newsletter.)

**Historical Society of
Pottawattamie County**

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Inside...

For younger folk Harry Langdon is just the name of a local street, yet if one looks at the entertainment columns of the early 20th Century his fame rivaled that of the better remembered Charlie Chaplan, Laurel and Hardy, and others. Indeed there was a strong rumor Harry might be replacing Stan Laurel in the famed comedy duo. Read the details on page 5.



Streetcars capture a certain amount of fond nostalgia today, but when service ended in Council Bluffs nobody seemed to care. In fact the streetcar never even finished its run. See the story on page 8 for more.

Fairmount Park is undergoing exciting new developments. The park has a long and fascinating history in Council Bluffs. Learn more with the stories on pages 3 and 10.