

# Historical Society Of Pottawattamie County

*Member Journal*

September 2016

## Pursuing Paranormal, The Scientific Way

It's easy to dismiss the tales of ghosts at the Society's 1885 rotary cell jail as fiction or products of creative people with over-active imaginations. What's harder to discount are voices and images actually recorded by investigators. Can these unworldly observations hold up to scientific scrutiny?

Sunday, October 9 the Historical Society of Pottawattamie County examines that very question with the program "Pursuing

Paranormal, the Scientific Way" to be held at 2 p.m. at The Center, 714 South Main Street in Council Bluffs. Angie Oehler, of the paranormal investigative group August Night Paranormal, will explain how such anomalies can be studied objectively and share some of the empirical evidence her group has gathered.

Ms. Oehler has explored paranormal locations throughout the United States and Europe over the past twenty-five years; she is a United States Air Force veteran where she worked in military intelligence. She holds a Master's degree in History and Cyber Security as well as Information System's Management. Ms. Oehler is a member of the Historical Society and has served as vice-president.

There is no admission charge and Society members are encouraged to bring guests.

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### *Halloween at the "Squirrel Cage"*

The 1885 "Squirrel Cage" jail is spooky enough by day; a visit after sunset makes the experience even more eerie... and just right for Halloween.

*(Continued page 5)*

### *The Bregants and Their Unique Home Topic of November Program*

Jean Bregant came from Austria and, at 47 inches tall, was probably the smallest Knights Templar and Shriner in the world. Mrs Bregant was 42 inches tall. Both vaudeville performers before settling in Council Bluffs, they became well-known for advertising and promoting the Woodward Candy Company.

*(Continued page 5)*



*(Advertising card donated by HSPC member Lois Hanusa.)*

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# Forty Years Ago This Fall: Fire Claimed "Old AL"

Forty years ago in October about a thousand Council Bluffs children found themselves without a school following a blaze that destroyed the original Kirn Junior High building. The structure at 511 Bluff Street had served as "Council Bluffs High School" and "Abraham Lincoln High School" prior to being renamed for longtime educator Gerald Kirn in 1967.

Two ninth grade students at the school and a 17-year-old high school dropout were arrested the following day for the incident. News accounts at the time reported one of the 15-year-olds said he set the fire to a teacher's desk drawer to burn up some papers. In a different version of the story one of the youths claimed in a 1996 interview they had been playing a few blocks away at Zeplan's Palace game room (now Duncan's Cafe) and ran out of quarters. They broke into the school to see if they could find any stereo equipment or other valuables that could be sold for cash, and the fire was completely unintentional. To avoid detection the trio didn't turn on any lights, instead using matches to see. One match accidentally dropped into a teacher's desk drawer and set a small fire; they closed the drawer hoping to smother the fire and left the building hastily.

The fire started in an art room on the third floor. The first alarm was received at 1:50 a.m. Sunday (October 3, 1976); fifty firefighters and twelve trucks were needed to bring the blaze under control.

Charges against the 17-year-old were dropped, as were arson charges against the 15-year-olds. The two younger boys did plead guilty to breaking and entering and were sent to the State Training School for Boys at Eldora.

Kirn students were accommodated at Woodrow Wilson Junior High in a split shift arrangement in which Wilson students started classes at 6:25 a.m. When the Wilson students were dismissed those from Kirn took their places for classes that lasted until 5:15 p.m.

Voters had rejected three consecutive bond issues for school system improvements but by a narrow two percent approved a new school in February, 1977. The new Kirn Junior High held its first classes September 16, 1979, almost three years after the fire.

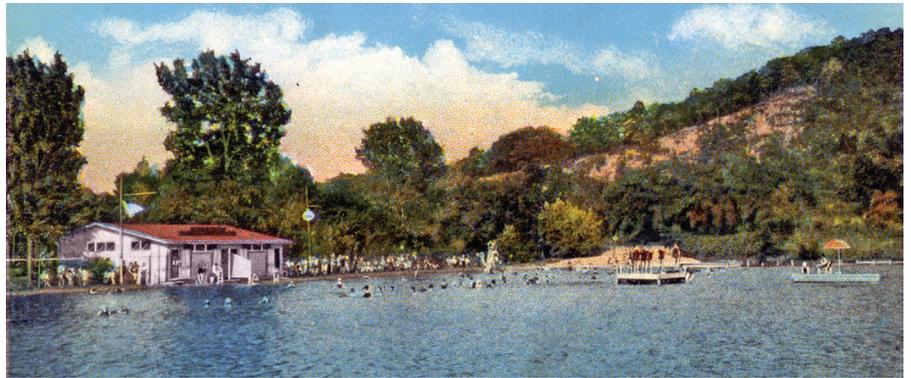




*The photo above shows school board members Michael O'Bradovich (left) and Michael Winchester (right) talking with Gerald W. Kirn in front of the school named for him. Mr. Kirn was the principal in the building from 1919 to 1946. After the building was razed a new school on Highway Six was given the Kirn name.*

### *Feedback From Our Readers...*

Our article last issue about swimming opportunities in Council Bluffs prior to the city's municipal pools drew a number of comments. HSPC member Michael Winchester noted we forgot to mention there was swimming at Big Lake Park (see the photos below) as well as an indoor pool at the YMCA, on First Avenue at South 7th Street. Mr. Winchester noted the small Y pool was described in its advertising as a "Water Gymnasium," a rather grand name for "the only pool I had ever seen where you could drag your feet across the ceiling, scrape your chin on the bottom of the pool and bump your head on the opposite side of the pool in one dive." We also shared the swimming story on the Society's Facebook page "Council Bluffs Revealed." Judith posted a comment there that swimming was also available at a private pool at the Elks Club during that era.



*The Gilbert Brothers contracted with the park board in 1895 to construct a new eight acre lake for the purpose of cutting ice. The park board built a bath house by what was now known as "Gilbert's Lake" and opened it to swimming. Sand was brought in to cover the lake's natural mud bottom in the shallower area. A tall fence was erected to prevent anyone from entering without paying admission; bathing suits were available for rent but only in the color purple, perhaps to make them less desirable to take home. Though originally touted as having exceptionally high quality water the lake was closed to swimming in 1935 because of inability to maintain an acceptable level of purity. The photo above shows the bath house and beach; the lower photo shows the site as it appears today. The Union Pacific locomotives in the background illustrate the proximity of the tracks, which would have been those of the Chicago and North Western at the time the beach was open.*

# Off to School, 1853 Style

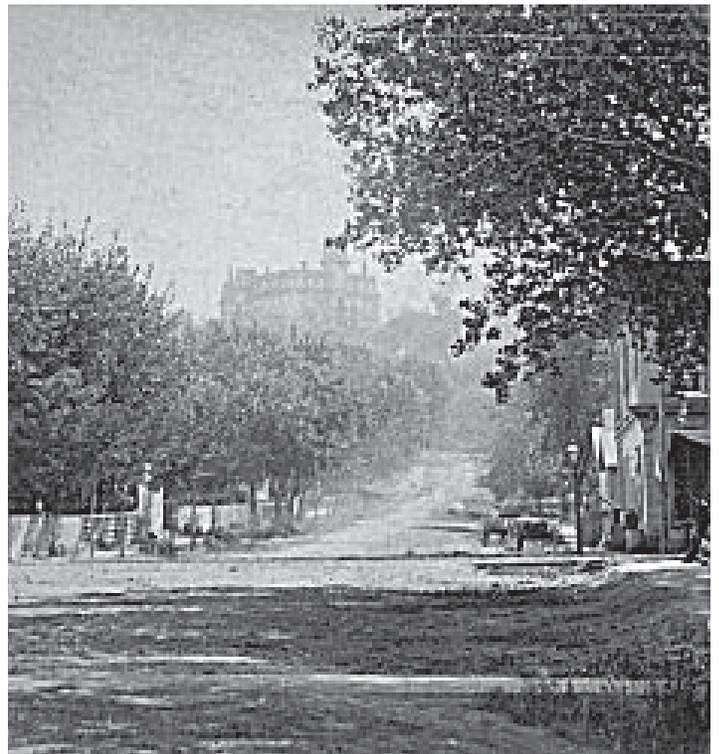
*For the past 163 years fall has meant the start of school, but in the early days the town would have appeared very foreign to today's students.*

Council Bluffs, 1853, was a bustling and somewhat transient mix of hordes of California emigrants intermixed with Gentiles, Mormons, and Indians who called it home, at least for the interim. There was open gambling (mostly faro, keno, and three card monte) on the streets by day, and it continued by lantern light throughout most of the night. Thousands of Indians of different tribes pitched their tents all over the county and in town. By this time the Mormon population had dwindled to those that hadn't yet followed Brigham Young to Utah or for whatever reason did not intend to follow.

Houses were mostly one story chinked log and covered with dirt and straw; hundreds lived in "root holes" dug into the hillsides.

For most locals, schools were of minor importance. The Mormons had a school system in place since 1847 that divided Kaneshville into four wards, each with a Mormon-operated private school. The first school for the general public began in 1853. Mr. File was the lone teacher in a building made of rough cottonwood planks resting on pegs located on Broadway. Mr. File's teaching methods were recalled as being "as rude as the furniture around him."

Despite the new school being open to all, the Mormons continued to operate a separate school for a time. In 1856 "the small array of saints left joined with the gentiles on school matters" and moved classes to the court house, then on Hyde Street (now South First Street). The judge frequently had to issue quiet orders to "quell the babble at recess time" as it disturbed juries.



*(Above) Odd Fellows Hall on Stutsman which was used for classes in the early 1860s before Council Bluffs had any school buildings. (Right) The city's first actual high school was more than just an educational institution-- it was a monument to civic pride placed on six acres atop a high hill. Though doubtless quite visually impressive, demands for a more accessible location led to its abandonment by 1900. (Both photos courtesy of Council Bluffs Public Library.)*

*“Off to School,” continued...*

William H. Kinsman moved classes to the Odd Fellows Hall on Stutsman, a “two story, sway backed frame building.” The school remained there for three years, though Mr. Kinsman was killed in the Civil War during the Battle of Black River Bayou in Mississippi in 1863.

By this time the number of pupils had increased sufficiently to warrant creation of an east and west school district, the division point being Market Street (today’s Park Avenue).

In 1856 James B. Rue established a private school on what is now Kanessville Boulevard which operated for nine years. Mr. Rue came to Council Bluffs in 1853 from Kentucky; he was regarded as an excellent teacher and administrator and later became principal of the city’s high school. Rue School, built in 1924, was named for Mr. Rue.

There were no playgrounds. Students had to amuse themselves at recess as best they could. Boys would dive head first into snow banks for fun or play “shinny”-- trying to make another boy fall with a hard knock to the shin. Sledding was popular for boys and those girls whose mothers would permit it; other mothers preferred their daughters play with dolls or do crochet work “that prepared their minds for good work in the future.”

Council Bluffs Independent School District was officially established by a vote of the people in 1859 and Dexter Bloomer elected as president. The city’s first building specifically constructed to be a school was established on Stutsman Street in 1864. The brick, two-story building was used for over twenty years. In 1869 voters approved a \$30,000 loan to build a high school-- a “massive brick edifice”-- placed high atop a hill so all could see that when it came to education, Council Bluffs had arrived.

*(Information in this article drawn from material contributed by Danette Hein-Snyder, Membership and Special Projects coordinator Historic General Dodge House, HSPC board of directors member Jon Barnes, and HSPC member Michael Winchester.)*

*“The Bregants,” continued...*

They had a house constructed on Fourth Street built and furnished to scale for them. The house still stands and is being refurbished by Preserve Council Bluffs.

Pat Murphy, president of Preserve Council Bluffs, will present a program about the Bregants, their house, and its restoration at the Society’s November program. The program will be at The Center, 714 South Main Street in Council Bluffs; the date has not been confirmed as yet; please watch for a later mailing or check our website for date and time.

*“Squirrel Cage Halloween,” continued...*

For four nights only, October 28-31, the Historical Society will be offering guided flashlight tours of the historical “Squirrel Cage” jail from 6 to 10 p.m. Admission is \$10 per person at the door and \$7 if tickets are purchased in advance; members are admitted at the door for \$7. Tours will start every hour on the hour, with the last tour starting at 9 p.m. Tours will include a history of the jail with some ghost stories; flashlights will be provided.

Tour size will be limited, so if this is something you want to do purchasing tickets in advance is recommended.

For more information or to purchase tickets call the Historical Society at (712) 323-2509.



**Don’t Miss Any HSPC Events!  
Stay up-to-date with Facebook.**

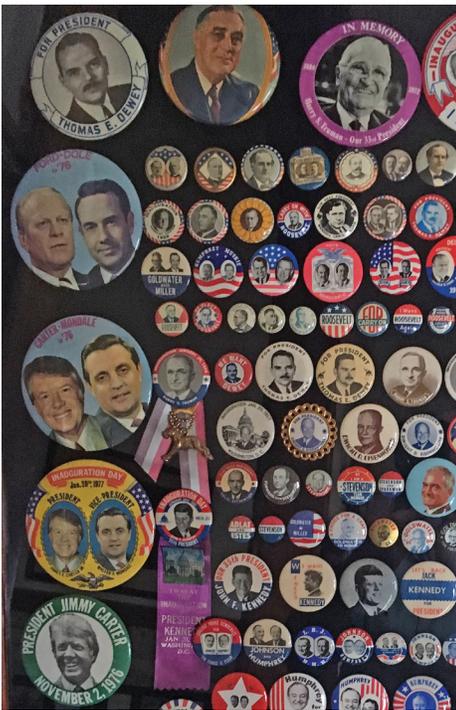
It’s easy to stay informed-- “Like” the Historical Society’s three Facebook pages. To find them search Facebook for “Council Bluffs Revealed,” “Council Bluffs, IA Railroads,” and “Squirrel Cage Jail” or follow the links on our website [www.TheHistoricalSociety.org](http://www.TheHistoricalSociety.org)



# “Railroad Days” Brings 2500 Visitors to RailsWest Museum

## *Did You Like Ike?*

The current election campaign is nothing new; presidential aspirants having been aggressively vying for the top spot for a very long time. That makes this the perfect season to visit the RailsWest Museum and examine the campaign button collection. See how many of these candidates you remember! RailsWest will be open through October 31.



*(Lower right) The Historical Society relied on staff, board members, and volunteers to ensure Railroad Days guests enjoyed their visit to RailsWest. Pictured (left to right) is museum guide Phil Wagner, board of directors member Jon Barnes, museum guide Trudy Beno, HSPC Museums Manager Kat Slaughter, Board of directors member Pat Hytrek, and HSPC member/volunteer Alicia Kerns. Photos by HSPC president Mariel Wagner.*



*(Above) The Alton, Potts & Hruby Families at Railroad Days. They made the tie-dye shirts specifically for the occasion.*



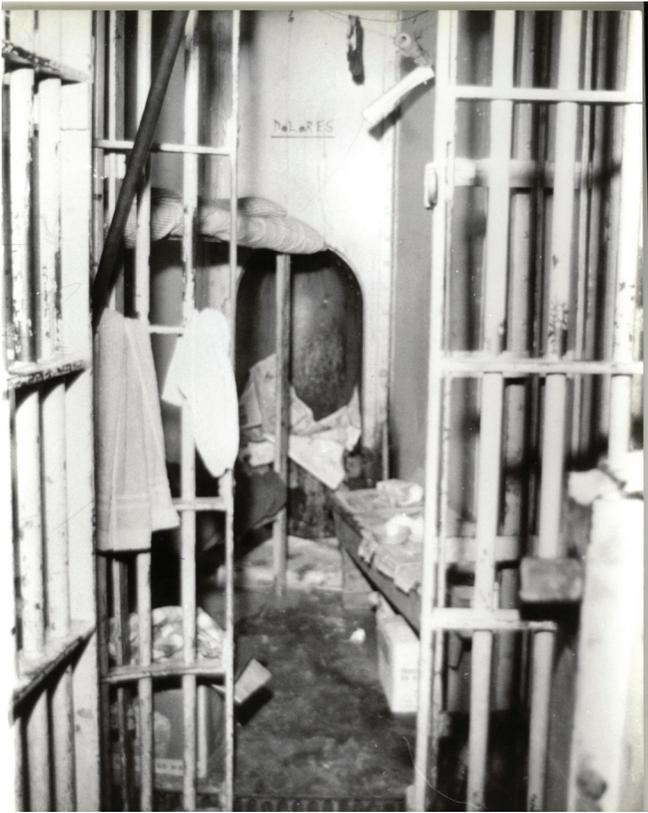
# As It Was...



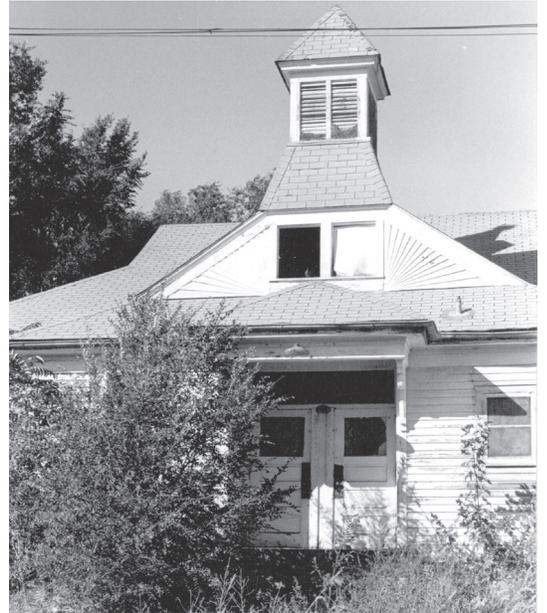
*(Above) Thomas Jefferson High School girls volleyball, 1941.*

*(Below) West Broadway taken from the 200 block facing southwest. The Bennett Building toward the center of the picture still stands; the rest of the buildings disappeared during the urban renewal project of the early 1970s.*





*(Left) Inmates of the "Squirrel Cage" jail were not always neat housekeepers, as this 1960s photo shows. (Right) The two room country school just north of Council Bluffs on the Lincoln Highway in its final days in 1981. It was originally named for an early settler; opening as Barrett School in 1903. The name was changed to Iowana School in 1937. When a new consolidated school was built behind, the old school became the lunch room. Prior to consolidation Lake Township also operated Woodland School, also on the Lincoln Highway, Vineland School on Lime Kiln Road, and Rainbow School on Mynster Springs Road near Big Lake park. (Below) South Main Street looking north; the photo is undated but the top of the Grand Hotel can be seen along Pearl Street placing the picture prior to 1925.*



# Thanks to Pauline “Cut-Off Lake” Became “Manawa”



MANHATTAN BEACH PARK, LAKE MANAWA.

Over the years various persons have been given credit for having conferred the “Manawa” name to Cut-Off Lake. According to Lake Manawa researcher Dr. James L. Knott a letter dated July 6, 1886 discovered by the late Frank Smetana solved the puzzle, giving the credit to “Pauline.” Unfortunately we don’t know Pauline’s last name, but from her writing we can assume she’s probably young and something of a romantic.

The name “Manawa” was first introduced legally in 1887 when Hattie and Israel Hay designated their newly platted subdivision along the north shore as “Manawa Park.” The name came into common usage when the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad began to refer to Lake Manawa in their literature.

The complete text of Pauline’s letter is reprinted below.

July 6, 1886

*My Dear Maud:*

*You will be Camp surprised. I know, to learn that there is so beautiful a spot as this only three miles from Council Bluffs. While you lived here, people were sighing for a body of water near at hand where they might have a little boating, fishing and bathing. All of these amusements are now quite the rage at this lake, which is a cut-off from the river southwest of the town.*

*Last evening over five hundred people-- many of the elite of Council Bluffs-- visited the lake. Six modern and very convenient bathrooms have just been erected by the Odell Brothers on a fine sandy beach, where bathing suits for ladies and gentlemen may be rented, if one is not already provided. I go in swimming with Fred every evening. Ours is the first and only camp around the lake, though there are a number of farm-houses in immediate vicinity where we buy nice fresh eggs, milk, butter, cheese, and spring chickens. We do our cooking on a gasoline stove, and live royally. Upon our arrival I inquired of some of those farmers and fishermen what the lake was called, and what do you suppose, they replied? “Cut-Off.” I was horrified and implored them to rename it. They did not seem to crave that honor and told me to christen it and they would consent to change it. I chose the Indian name “Manawa,” How do you like it?*

*“Letter from Pauline,” continued...*

*You know how very funny this town is about naming their drives and parks after citizens who are instrumental in pushing them through-- for instance, “Graham Avenue,” “Sapp Drive,” “Vaughn Avenue,” “Bayliss Park,” etc. I was in terror for fear they would change the name of this lake to “Odell Brothers.” O, to prevent such a dire catastrophe, I hope these farmers and fishermen will be as good as their word and call it by its new name.*

*Cousin Fred and I have been entertaining ourselves during the heat of the day by lying in the hammock and reading the romantic stories of the brave scout, William Wallace. I have become as much infatuated with him as ever the lovely Lady Helen or her silly stepmother, Lady Mar, could have been, so I have named our camp after his castle, Ellerslie. Mama is enjoying the camp life and is much improved since we left the chilly atmosphere of Leadville. Papa and Joe come down from town early every evening and participate in the late sports. As usual, in Council Bluffs nearly all the young men come down to the lake without ladies. It has really reached such a climax here, that if a lady is seen out driving with a gentleman, it is safe to say, she has her own rig and he begged a ride. You don't catch our Leadville boys riding around alone or with other boys. All the rowboats were taken out very early last evening, so the remaining crowd took the steamer, Ollie May, or the sailboat, Sea Gull, for a tour of the lake. The dock is very primitive and causes the poor old steamer considerable anguish to tear itself away, when well loaded. As the captain cried “All aboard,” Harry B. enthusiastically climbed to the top of the steamer and pulled the whistle. The steamer, meanwhile, tugged in vain. Finally some of the boys saw the cause of the trouble and hustled Jim B. to the other side of the boat. (Jim is just as good natured and lovely as ever). This seemed to encourage her, so off she steamed for the point, and was soon lost to sight, while some party in a rowboat could be heard singing: “I saw the steamer go around the bend.” Next week Fred and I propose to have an illumination and fireworks. We have been making a collection of long cattails, which we will dip in kerosene and stick up in the sand a couple of feet apart all along our shoreline. At dusk we will light them, and send off our Roman candles and skyrockets.*

*The moon is bright tonight, and I see a rowboat coming around the point and hear a familiar tenor voice with guitar accompaniment. As I am to take a boat ride with the “regular” this evening, I will bid you good-bye for the present. (My heart goes “pit-a-pat.”)*

*Yours, ever lovingly, Pauline*

The word “Manawa” has most commonly been accepted as meaning “peace and comfort.” Colonel J.W. Colby, Adjutant General of the Nebraska National Guard, advised Mayor M.F. Rohrer of another meaning in a letter dated October, 1901.

*(Reprinted from “Mecca of the Midwest” by Dr. James L. Knott.)*

## *What does “Manawa” mean?*

The name Manawa given to the beautiful lake at Council Bluffs should be pronounced Man-ah'-wa, with the accent on the second syllable. This is not an uncommon word in many Indian tribes and especially with the Creek and Muskagee nations. There are several persons whom I have met bearing the name Manawa. The meaning of the word is rather difficult of translation; it is composed of the words: ‘man,’ ‘yonder’ or ‘over there’ and ‘awa,’ ‘they come.’ It might be considered an exclamation of delight or admiration as ‘be-hold there,’ or ‘see the beauty there.’

Trusting that this information may be of some interest.

Signed,  
Col. J.W. Colby

# Historical Society of Pottawattamie County

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*There's something in a name and "Cut-Off Lake" just doesn't make it. "Mawawa," however, has a romantic and maybe even a bit of a mysterious sound. Thanks to a young lady 130 years ago the lake got the better label. Learn how it came about on page 10.*

*Nothing says "bad idea" like tying a note to a railroad signal torpedo and tossing it to one's sweetheart. It didn't work out so well; see page 5.*

*If you were in junior high in Council Bluffs forty years ago your school schedule just changed markedly. Remember the Kirn fire on page 2.*

