

Historical and Preservation Society of Pottawattamie County

Member Journal

Summer 2019

Kanesville Speaker Series to Bring Local Legends to the Forefront

Everybody likes a good story, and it's hard to imagine a place with more of them than Council Bluffs.

The Society has teamed with Preserve Council Bluffs to create what promises to be a highly informative as well as entertaining look at the area's past.

The first program of the series will examine the history of the Woodward Candy Factory, the Bregants and the role

they played at Woodward's, plus their unique home that was custom-made for their size. The program will be presented by Pat Murphy and Richard Warner. A tour of the Bregant House will follow the program. The talk will be at the Council Bluffs Public Library, Thursday, July 25, at 6:30 pm. Planned future topics include the Ogden Hotel, Playland Park, architect J. Chris Jensen, Lake Manawa, Wickham's bricks and houses, the old YMCA and a nostalgic look at the fast food drive-ins on Broadway.

There is no charge for Historical Society members; the fee for non-members is \$5. Due to library policy tickets for non-members who want to attend must be purchased in advance and cannot be bought at the door. Tickets can be purchased at the Society's museums, online at TheHistoricalSociety.org, or by contacting Pat Murphy at 402-850-0822.

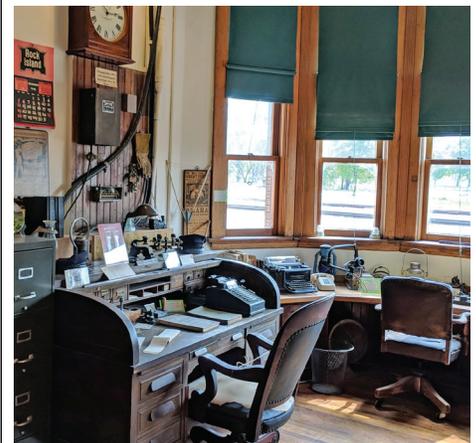
These programs will follow a "Share and Tell" format; guests having related photos or memorabilia to show are encouraged to bring it and after the lecture share any information, experiences or stories they may have about the topic.

Updates at Rails West Bring Archives Out of the Vaults

The Society's archives contain a great many treasures, but they can't tell their story when they are locked away in storage.

Under direction of Museums Manager Kat Slaughter a restructuring of exhibit space at the RailsWest Museum, 16th Avenue and South Main Street in Council Bluffs, will at last provide an opportunity for general history artifacts to be brought into view. Articles in the new display area will feature a variety of topics and will be changed out periodically to provide an opportunity to bring more items to the forefront.

Ms. Slaughter notes the updated exhibit area is separate from the two depot waiting rooms, thus not detracting from the railroad theme of the original museum area.



(Above) Ticket office of the 1899 Rock Island depot, part of the Society's Rails-West Museum.

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Council Bluffs-- Without A Transcontinental Railroad?

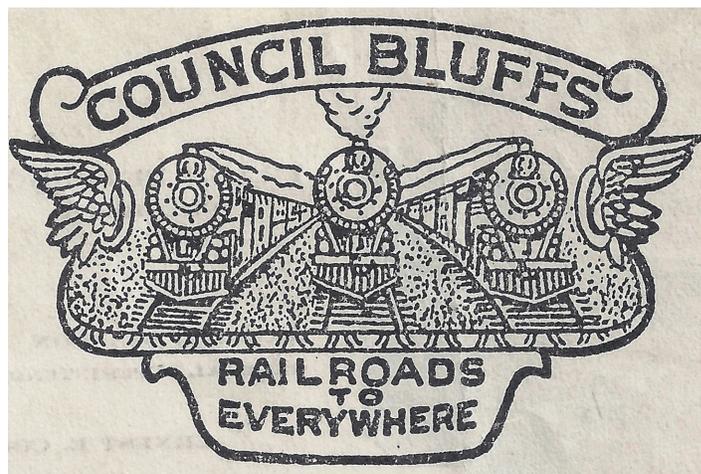
It's tricky to play the "what if" game. Wondering what the world would have been like had George Bailey not lived made for an entertaining Jimmy Stewart Christmas movie, but nobody really knows what the country would have been like had Abraham Lincoln and President Kennedy not been assassinated, for example, or what Council Bluffs would be like today had Abraham Lincoln not chanced to visit in 1859. Despite that, we none-the-less should be able to make some fairly safe assumptions.

Its not like there wouldn't have been a transcontinental railroad. California was becoming ever more desirable for the United States. Its inaccessibility made it more like a colony, and government leaders were aware how hard it was for an imperial power to maintain control over remote colonies. Theodore Judah had essentially dedicated his life to a transcontinental route and pushed the formation of the Central Pacific to make it happen. Grenville Dodge had long been a proponent, as well as had many politicians.

The railroad would have happened, but it might not have happened here. How would have that have changed Council Bluffs?

Once the eastern terminus was announced, Council Bluffs suddenly took on a new importance. Railroads were big business back east but plans to cross Iowa hadn't gained traction; the prevailing notion was stage coaches were plenty good enough for Iowa and there wasn't all that much need to rush. Once rails were brought up the river to build the line west all that changed; a railroad that could connect the lines of the east to this new western route should profit handsomely. The rail race across Iowa was on, and the tracks were all heading the same place— Council Bluffs.

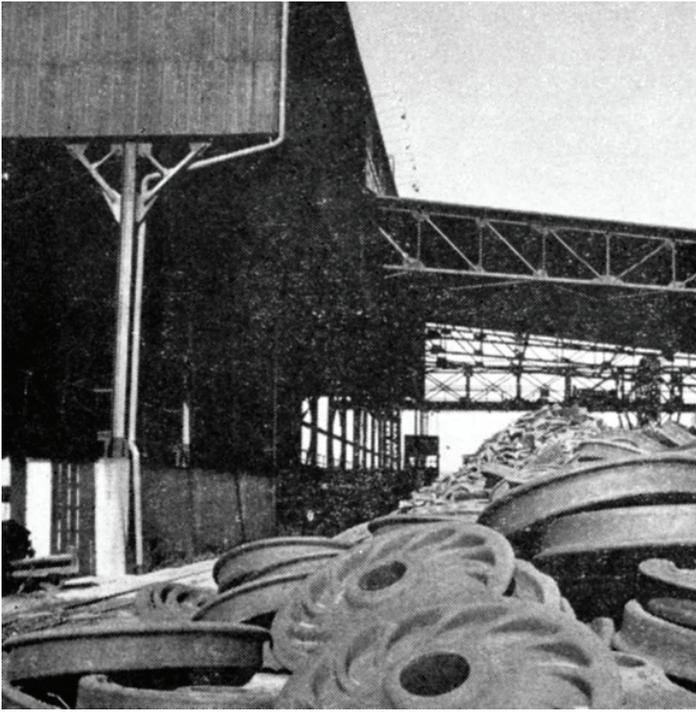
By 1865, when rails were first laid, Council Bluffs



had already established itself as a significant city through western migration. Had the transcontinental railroad gone elsewhere Council Bluffs surely would be on a rail line, probably more than one, but very unlikely to have been served by eight class I railroads. Almost no city, even those much, much larger, enjoyed that advantage.

Because of this Council Bluffs' growth exploded. The country revolved around railroads, and Council Bluffs had them— and plenty of them. Population doubled in one decade; in 1888 alone 1169 new buildings were constructed. A huge agricultural business developed. It was estimated this section of the Midwest had 200,000 farms pouring their products into the grain elevators of Council Bluffs. A large farm implement manufacturing and sales business developed in the south end of town. The railroads made it easy for manufacturers to get supplies, and to export their finished products. After awhile Bluffs manufacturers were turning out just about everything from confectionery to cigars to carriages. Cattle came as well, resulting in a large stock yards industry.

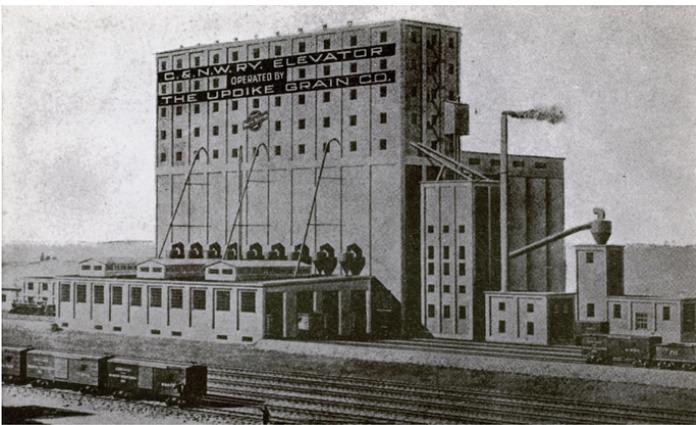
Once the Golden Spike was driven people and freight could move easily from coast-to-coast, but there was still a barrier for perishable goods. Railroads responded by building special insulated cars and ice plants along the route. The Pacific Fruit Express ice docks at 33rd and 14th Avenue in Council Bluffs were efficient at icing the cars, but labor intensive, providing the city a great many jobs. Thousands of train wheels were manufactured at Griffin Wheel on 9th Avenue, adding hundreds more jobs. Just a few blocks away the Railway Mail Service terminal for a time was the city's largest employer. It's



numbers were staggering; the terminal could process 14,000 pieces of mail per hour; they worked three shifts, 365 days a year.

Being a terminal point for so many railroads netted Council Bluffs a first class YMCA. There already was a YMCA in Council Bluffs but its conversion to a Railroad YMCA in 1929 provided growth and prosperity, including expansion and remodeling of the facility as well as more programming.

The railroads grew and so did the town. The tremendous growth led to a very positive attitude in the late 19th century and into the early 20th century. The prevailing notion was there existed no limit to our potential; “no city east or west possesses the assurance of profitable returns as does Council Bluffs.” By 1953 the Union Pacific was the city’s single largest employer with a full quarter of the population dependent upon the railroads for a living.



Not everything the railroads brought was desirable. Railroads provided an endless supply of transient strangers, which proved great prospects for those of evil intent. Historian Ryan Roenfeld noted, “The wily skills shown on the muddy streets of Council Bluffs during the late 19th century would be the envy of the author of any Nigerian e-mail scam circulating the Internet today.” Council Bluffs was a centralized location for con artists to work from; it was so much easier to just stay put and let the pigeons flock to them. Better yet, the victims were generally just passing through. Before they could cause too much fuss they were on another train out of town, somewhat less financially well off than when they arrived. Where were the police during all of this? It appears as long as no locals were hassled strangers passing through were considered fair game. It was a different era with a different attitude; one law enforcement officer was quoted as saying it serves the victims right; “The shenanigans only succeeded because of the fundamental dishonesty of the victims wanting something for nothing.”



The economy was booming; Council Bluffs was the fifth largest rail center in the country— quite an impressive feat considering it was nowhere near the fifth largest in population. Then times changed.

(Continued page 4)

Council Bluffs position as milepost zero of the transcontinental railroad led to explosive growth and variety of industries that in one way or another related to the railroads, such as manufacturing train wheels, grain elevators, and the mail terminal.

“Transcontinental Railroad,” continued...

The railroads were, and remain, as important as ever, but it doesn't take nearly as many people to keep the trains rolling. Diesels don't require the manpower that steam locomotives did; they need less maintenance and a fireman isn't necessary in the cab. Much that had been done by hand became mechanized. Even the Railway Mail Service terminal became a casualty of the ZIP code and the mechanization it permitted. Though the trains kept right on rolling to and through Council Bluffs employment dipped precipitously and the city fell into economic doldrums. As business dipped local merchants couldn't afford improvements, making the downtown look outdated; by the 1960s a whopping 77% of southwest Iowa retail business was going across the river to Nebraska. This triggered the aggressive urban renewal project that dramatically changed downtown.

So where does that leave us in our “what if” game? If the transcontinental railroad had started elsewhere the best guess is the metro area would be much smaller; some prognosticators have speculated the Council Bluffs/Omaha population would be closer to ten thousand than the nearly one million it is today. We would likely be minus some of our tourist attractions. Seems unlikely the Union Pacific would have placed their museum in Council Bluffs had milepost zero been elsewhere. Would UP Chief Engineer Dodge have built his home in Council Bluffs if he had been working out of a different city? The “Squirrel Cage” jail came into being because the explosive growth of the city fueled by the railroads outpaced the efforts of law enforcement to keep up. Additional capacity was needed quickly and economically. Certainly there wouldn't have been a Golden Spike monument, as there would have been no milepost zero along Ninth Avenue to mark.

What Council Bluffs really would have looked like without the transcontinental railroad will never be known exactly. It's not a risky assumption, however, that the metro area would be much different had that encounter between Lincoln and Dodge not taken place on the veranda of the Pacific House Hotel 160 years ago this summer.

(Story based on information presented at a Historical Society program presented by Danette Hein-Snyder and Richard Warner.)



HPSPC's Jon Barnes arranges a photo exhibit about the history of Lake Manawa and the 144-year-old Fish and Game Club as Danette Hein-Snyder looks on. The display is located on the second floor of the August Beresheim House, starting point for tours of the General Dodge House.

Society Acquires “Squirrel Cage” Jail Arrest Records

Arrest records from 1890 through the 1960s have been turned over to the Society for preservation by the Pottawattamie County Sheriff's Department. The records include mug shots, crimes, and sentences. Society vice-president J.W. LeMaster explained to the board of directors this information provides a interesting insight into not only the people that called the “Squirrel Cage” home for a short period of their lives but also a valuable insight as to society and life in Council Bluffs during those time periods.

Flashlight Tours Planned for October

The “Squirrel Cage” jail can seem intimidating enough in the daylight; touring after dark adds an extra dimension of intrigue. The past few years the Society has been offering guided tours of the 1885 jail by flashlight. These tours have proven increasingly popular, says Museums Manager Kat Slaughter, and several dates will be added around Halloween.

B'nai Israel Synagogue has Long History in Council Bluffs

Council Bluffs had many names including Hart's Bluff, Camp Kearney, Miller's Hollow and Kanesville until the decade of the 1850's. In 1853 Kanesville became Council Bluffs.

Council Bluffs Jewry dates back to the 1850's when those Jewish pioneers were refugees from economic and political crises their German and Bohemian homelands. The first Jews were Sol Bloom, A. B. Newman and Henry Eisman. Shortly after these three came the families of H. Mosler, F. Friedman, Simon Eisman, F. Hershberg, A. Goldstein and L. Harris. Council Bluffs grew with the passage of the Homestead Law and the building of the Union Pacific Railroad.

In 1881, 25 charter members formed the Congregation of Bikor Cholim. They rented a building where the Water Works was later located. Also purchased was a cemetery east of the city, where it was divided into two sections to be used by the reform and traditional Jewish groups. By the late 1800's, the former Temple Emanuel disbanded and its Sefer Torah and \$900 treasury were donated to Chevra B'nai Yisroel Congregation, now known as B'nai Israel Synagogue.

This new congregation was incorporated November 9th, 1903 by Isaac Gillinsky, George Whitebook, M. Frieden, M. Solomon, B. Gillinsky, Samuel Snyder, E. Pill and M. Marcus. The congregation totaled 14 men; They didn't mention women in those days.

A cornerstone was laid for a synagogue on June 19th, 1904 at 618 Mynster Street. This synagogue served the active Jewish population of this community until a disastrous fire destroyed the



building February 26th, 1930. It was believed that a defective flue in the attic was the cause of the blaze. A neighbor boy who had noticed flames on the roof summoned the firemen in the middle of the night and they pressed into service every piece of fire-fighting equipment to battle the fire.

Now the women play a part. Mrs. A. Diamond, Miss Rosie Fox and Mrs. Charles Endleman entered the synagogue through the smoke and heat to retrieve the sacred Torah and carry it to safety. The women and several men went in a short time later to save other artifacts and valuable books. Homes nearby were soaked with water but none had serious damage. The estimated loss was \$15,000 and their insurance was only \$3,000. Services were held in homes while the congregation set out to raise funds to rebuild their synagogue.

In less that one year, this task was accomplished and construction began. Because they found the 1904 cornerstone in the ruins of the fire and it became part of the new cornerstone, which was laid in late summer of 1930. Dedication services were held on January 11th, 1931, with Rabbi H. Grodzinsky of Omaha presiding. The new brick building was considered one of the most modern small church plants in the region. Simon Shyken was president of the congregation then and continued his leadership until 1947.

(Continued page 7)

“Most Talked About Bit of Highway in the Country: Rainbow Drive

By the 1920s Council Bluffs was a growing, prosperous city and leaders were turning their attention to quality of life. Parks board commissioners Andrew Graham and H.G. McGee were men on a mission to showcase Council Bluffs’ natural beauty with a park system that was second to none.

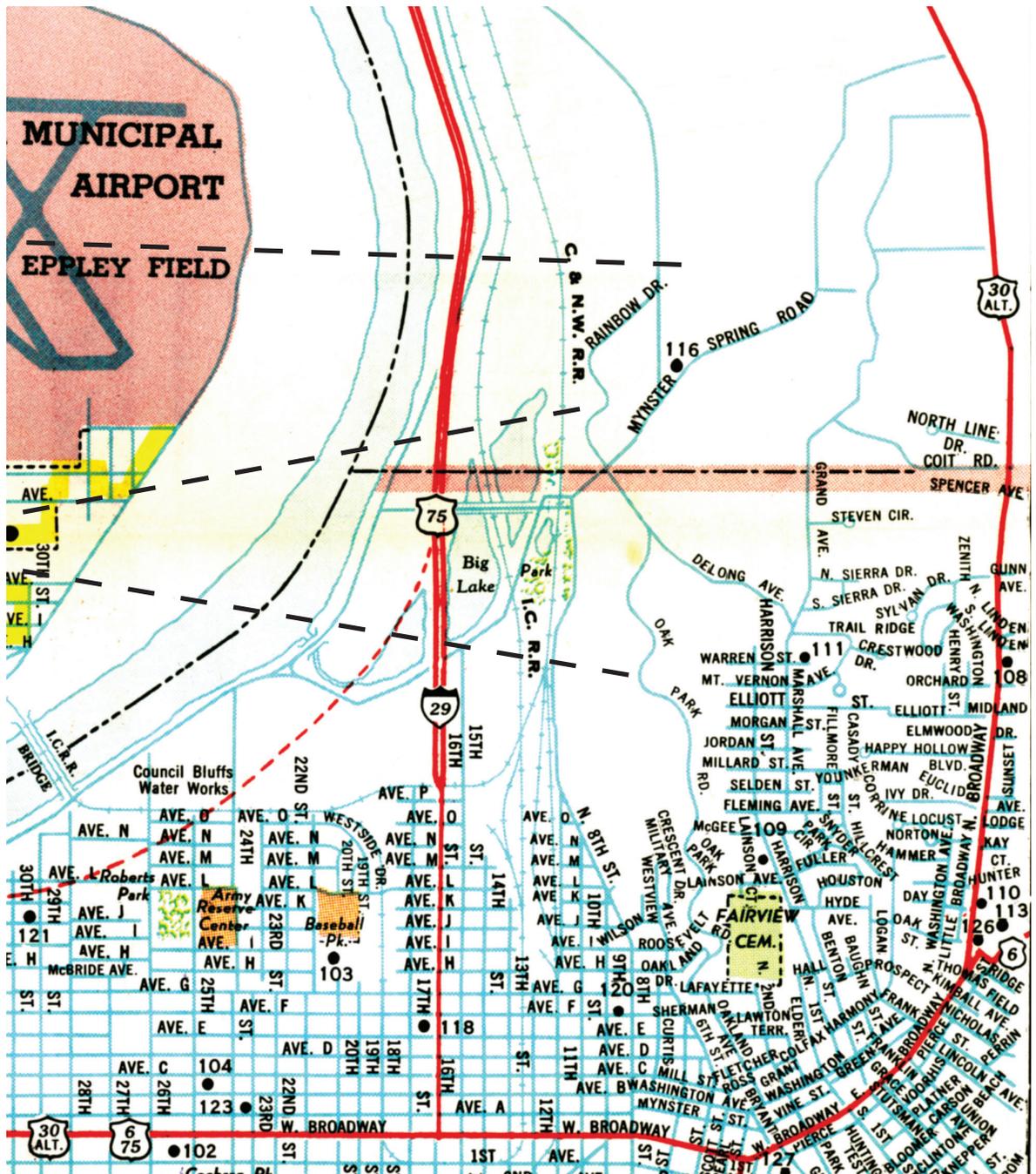
The Missouri River had run close to the Iowa bluffs but after the flood of 1832 the channel moved west, leaving a brand new lake referred to

as “Cut-Off Lake,” “Spring Lake,” “Iowa Lake,” and finally “Big Lake.” Through the action of Congressman William Fletcher Sapp the government deeded the lake to the city, creating a city park that was outside the city limits. A government surveyor’s error-- saying northeast when he should have said northwest-- allowed a 23-acre tract of timber north of Big Lake to be deeded to the city as well and named Greenwood Park.

(Continued next page)

Rainbow Drive originally continued east, bridging Mynster Springs Road (then Everett Road) to connect to Grand Avenue (then Sapp Drive) and the Lincoln Highway.

Some portions of Rainbow Drive were still in existence when this map was printed in 1955. Note the section of the scenic drive leading to Lincoln Monument is labeled Oak Park Road on this map, a name that came into use in the 1940s.



“Rainbow Drive,” continued...

Parks Commissioner McGee thought a scenic drive in the hills would complement this new park development and donated \$1000 to get the project started.

The plan was to create a scenic bypass that would route cross-country travelers from the Lincoln Highway north of town along the bluff tops overlooking the Missouri River valley and either into town via Prospect Park and Harrison Street or toward the Omaha bridge via River Boulevard. The Daily Nonpareil editorialized, “If it could be done there is little doubt that it would become one of the most famous and most talked about bits of highway in the country.”

The scenic road was to be named “Rainbow Drive” in honor of the 42nd Infantry. The “Rainbow Division” served in France during World War I and took its name from a comment of Douglas MacArthur regarding the widely varied geographic background of the units making up the division.

The first portion opened in 1925, the western section along the bluff tops in 1926. Response was enthusiastic; one observer wrote the view of the Missouri River from this vantage point rivaled that of the Danube in Europe.

The area became even more popular after the WPA constructed a monument commemorating Lewis and Clark at Rainbow Point, the highest overlook atop Mount Wickham.

Times and priorities change. There was talk in the early 1930s of expanding Rainbow Drive further north along the ridge tops but it never came to fruition. A bridge over a steep ravine went out a few years later closing the connection to the highway north of town. The city was in financial difficulty at the time and in the midst of the depression; replacement of a bridge on a scenic drive wasn't deemed a priority. Use of the bypass by tourists had dropped off by this time anyway due to rerouting of the Lincoln Highway through Blair rather than Council Bluffs. The bridge never

“Synagogue,” continued...

By the early 1950's there were 120 Jewish families in the city. In November 1953, the Chevra B'nai Yisroel Synagogue was changed to B'nai Israel Synagogue. A golden anniversary was celebrated for the synagogue on January 16th, 1955.

In 1996, congregation President Dr. Allen Kurland, said that despite declining attendance and the departure of many Jewish families in the community, he was optimistic about the synagogue's future. Howard Silber, longtime Omaha World-Herald reporter, wrote for the Jewish Community Center archives, “Much like the nation whose name it proudly bears, B'nai Israel Synagogue in Council Bluffs has managed repeatedly to overcome adversity.” Silber noted that Dr. Jerome Bleicher, who shared the presidency with Kurland, agreed that the congregation would have to attract more young people.

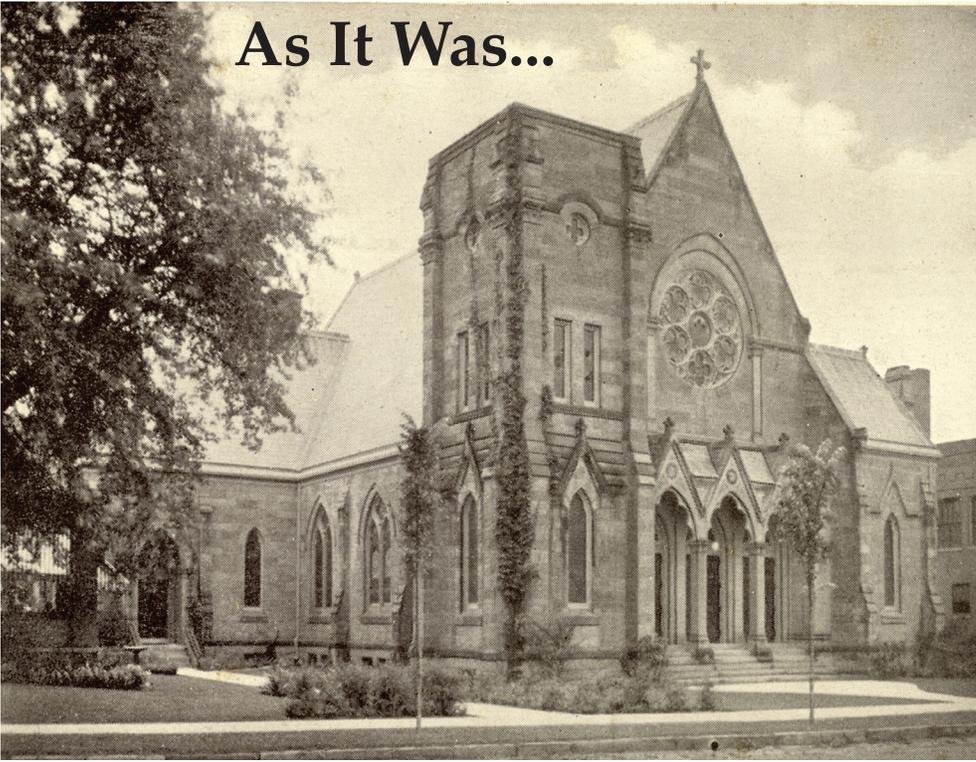
The 72 year old group held it's final meeting in May 2002. Sally Telpner, president of the Council Bluffs, chapter, said a dwindling Jewish population and aging membership were primary reasons for the chapter's termination. Edythe Krasne said that this leaves B'nai Israel Synagogue as the last Jewish organization in Council Bluffs.

*(Story by Bill Ramsey and Betty Shrier;
Reprinted from an earlier Society newsletter).*

was rebuilt. The section of Rainbow Drive that connected to downtown was renamed Oak Park Road, and became little used. Overgrown and full of ruts, the portion with no houses was closed a number of years ago. The area is now North Millard Street; dozens of homes have been built in the one-time wilderness. The western section along the Missouri River bluff tops between Big Lake Park and Rainbow Point was closed in the late 1960s as a public nuisance. It had become a perpetual dumping ground for trash, stolen automobiles, and other nefarious activities.

(Information taken from a Historical Society presentation in April. Research by Mary Lou McGinn, Cal Petersen, and Richard Warner.)

As It Was...



The mid 1970s brought many changes to downtown churches. St. Paul's Episcopal Church at 231 South 6th Street (upper left) tore down its rectory in 1966 (middle left) and replaced it with a two story parish house. The old church was torn down in 1973 and a new church was opened on Dillman Drive in 1975. The 1966 parish house (not pictured) remains today as an annex of the Pottawattamie County Court House.



In the same neighborhood at around the same time the old St. John's Lutheran Church was replaced with a new building. St. Francis Church at South 6th Street and Fifth Avenue was phased out and the building put up for sale. First Presbyterian, declared "full of termites and structurally unsound" was torn down in 1974 and a new sanctuary built in 1978.

Members of St. Francis transferred to Queen of Apostles, St. Peter's or St. Patrick's; First Presbyterian unified with Grace Presbyterian in 2005 becoming New Horizon.

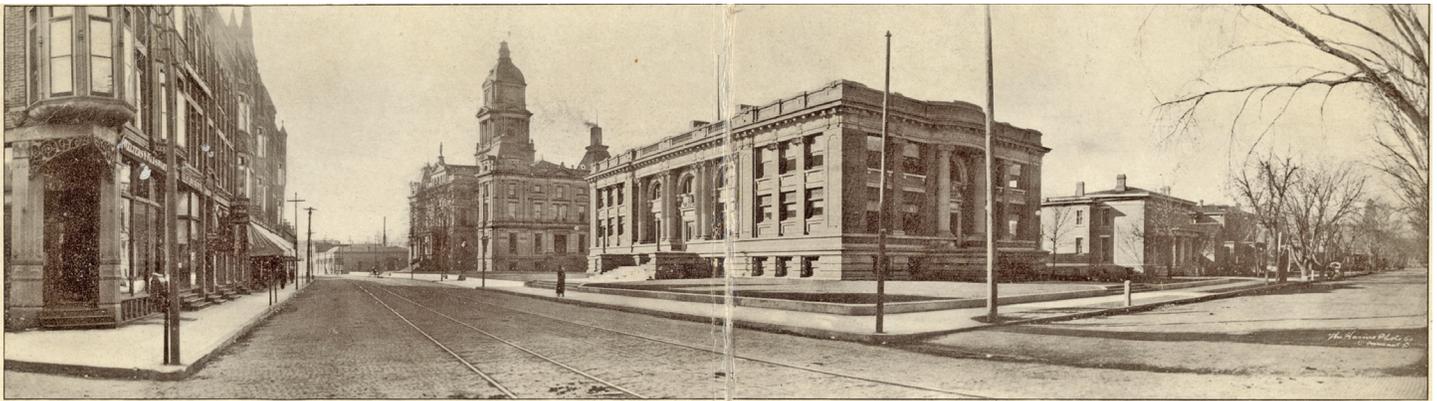


Volunteers salvaged the pulpit, choir benches, baptismal and the stained glass windows (right) in 1974 prior to the demolition of the ninety-year old Presbyterian church (left). Services were held in an education wing that had been added in 1955 until a new sanctuary was built in 1978. The building remains today as Refuge Ministries.





Kirn Field as it appeared in 1939. The site of Council Bluffs High School was transformed into an athletic field when a new high school was built a few blocks away. The field fell out of use for varsity football games after Abraham Lincoln High School moved to Bennett Avenue in 1967 and became completely unused by the school system after fire destroyed Kirn Junior High in 1976. A group of neighbors purchased the property from the school district and donated it to the city in 1990; the area today is Kirn Park.

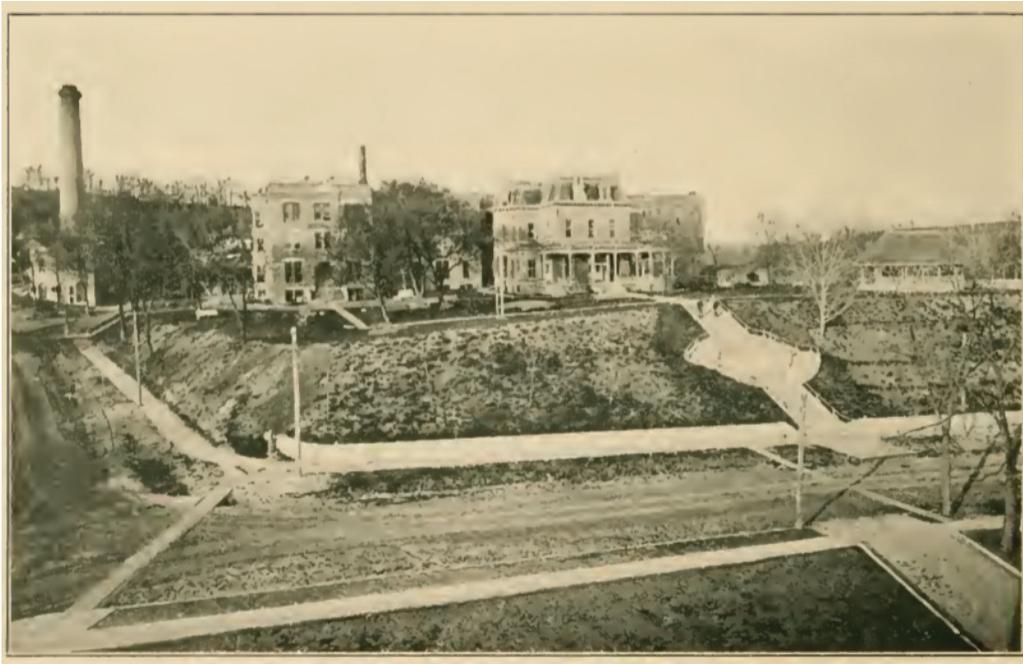


(Above) Looking southwest at South Main Street and Willow Avenue. The photo from the archives is undated but would have been taken prior to the late 1930s when the Merriam Building at the left of the photo was razed to for construction of city hall. Built in 1889, the Merriam Building is the newest of the structures pictured. (Left) The Iowana Motel was built on what was then U.S. Highway 6 east of Council Bluffs in 1920. A café was added in 1930. Portions of the motel, including the café, remain today as private dwellings.



“As it Was,” continued...

(Top left) The Nonpareil Photo Engraving Company occupied the southwest corner of 28th Street and West Broadway from the 1930s into the 1950s. Hinky Dinky grocery bought the property plus an adjacent filling station and two houses, tore them down, and built the largest super market in Iowa on the site. The “Super Store” opened in May, 1957. That building later operated as Jubilee Foods and Foodland before sitting vacant for several years; the former grocery store is home to Family Dollar today.



(Left center) St. Bernard's hospital as it appeared in 1909.



(Lower) Bryant Street in 1950, looking east. The crowded parking lot in the foreground was the site of city hall and the police station before its move to South Main Street in the 1950s. The side of Peoples Store is visible across the street. Bryant Street ceased to exist after the downtown urban renewal project of the 1970s. Today's Omni Centre Business Park (former Midlands Mall) covers this area.

**Historical Society of
Pottawattamie County**

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Council Bluffs' Rainbow Drive was envisioned as not just a local treasure, but a bypass from the Lincoln Highway that would treat cross-country travelers to a view rivaling that of the Danube in Europe and would become one of the most talked about bits of highway in the country. Learn more on page 6.

160 years ago this summer Abraham Lincoln met a young railroad surveyor at the Pacific House hotel in Council Bluffs. What would our city have looked like had the future president not happened to pay us a visit in August of 1859 or had he not chatted with Grenville Dodge? We couldn't resist playing the "What If" game; find our speculations on page 2.

