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A History of Centerville, Iowa

By

Willis M. (Bill) Heusinkveld
840 S. Park Avenue
Centerville, Iowa 52544

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Also written by W. M. Heusinkveld

Heusinkvelds in America (Genealogy) - 1966

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This Day in Iowa History - 1995

Cemeteries of Appanoose County, Iowa - 1999

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The History of Coal Mining in Appanoose County - 2007

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Centerville, Iowa

M. Heusinkveld
Avenue
Iowa 52544

September, 2009
Centerville, Iowa

M. Heusinkveld

(Genealogy) - 1966
State on Genealogy) - 1991
Appanoose County, Iowa - 1995
History - 1995
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- 1896 Plat book of Appanoose County published by Moulton Historical Society
- Centerville Square map showing businesses as they were in 1883
- National Register of Historic Places – Courthouse Square
- Other old maps of Centerville including aeriels
- Telephone Directories for 1884, 1903, 1908 and later years.
- .Interviews with knowledgeable citizens and plant tours
- Collier Encyclopedia – set of 20 volumes – 1955
- Google web sites

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Electric and Gas Service in Centerville

In the early days of Centerville's history, the settlers were dependent on candles for lighting, using olive oil, beeswax or whale oil for fuel. The first gas lighting was fired with methane or coal gas. Electric arc street lighting systems were becoming popular in the larger cities in the late 1800's. Centerville was a community of 4500 people in 1890 and was ready for a better lighting system.

In 1890, a street lighting franchise was granted to D. W. Hunt & Co. In the same year, it was transferred to **Centerville, Heat, Light and Power Co.**, owned by some of the Centerville businessmen. The first officers were W.G. Clark, James R. Wooden, W.M. Peatman and C.P. Campbell.

During 1891 the company was also granted franchises from the city for electric and manufactured gas systems as well as a heating system. They laid pipes over the city and installed a hot water system in the fall. A small gas manufacturing plant was built at the corner of 13th and Washington. This plant produced a gas by heating (gasification) of coal. By-products were coke and coal tar. The company delivered coal gas to the various businesses to use for store lighting may have also used the gas for some street lights.

A gas engine, augmented by a small steam Corliss engine, provided the power for a 40-lamp electric-arc street lighting system. These arc lamps produced a blindingly, brilliant continuous spark between two carbon rods. This system was generally unsatisfactory because of the high maintenance of the carbon rods and the harsh light that was emitted.

However, the company had severe financial problems, and had to borrow from D.C. Campbell, a Centerville banker. In 1893, the entire works was sold to D.C. Campbell, who operated the system, together with his sons, who lived in Chicago.

Thomas Edison invented the first successful incandescent lamp in 1879. With its steady, softly glowing filament, it was a vast improvement over the harsh arc lamp. In 1896 an incandescent lighting system was installed to replace the arc lights. A direct-current electric generator was installed to supply the commercial lighting system with 100 kilowatts of power at 220 volts d.c.. For a few years, all the lights were connected in series. If a single lamp burned out, the entire street would go dark. Eventually, the film cutout was invented to bypass the failed lamps.

In August 1900, the **Citizens Electric Light & Gas** was incorporated and was conveyed the electric and gas properties. Frank S. Payne, an attorney from Mt. Pleasant, was president. In 1901 the company put in the steam heating system which soon heated most of the business district, the Courthouse, the Armory and the Methodist Church.

In 1902, the company ventured into the electric railroad business. Since 1886, a mule-drawn street railway had been used for transportation the two miles from the Rock Island depot south of Centerville to the city square. The company purchased the mule line from C.R. Wooden and obtained a franchise to operate the electric railway system. Operation was started in November with three motor-operated street cars.

The route began at the Rock Island depot, west a short distance to 18th St., and north to take in the Burlington depot. It continued north to Walsh St., where it jogged west to 16th St., thence north to Sheridan. It went west past the palatial residence of C.W. Howell, eventually to be the office of Iowa Southern Utilities. The route turned north on Drake Ave., all the way to Maple, passing Governor Drake's home and several other magnificent homes. It went one block north to Main, thence north and east to circle the Courthouse square and on north to the car barn and electric substation. It was a scenic route.



Frank Payne



Mule Railway of 1886

Electric and Gas Service - continued



Electric trolley of 1902

The electric street car operation required wide streets (such as Drake Ave.) for the rails to be in the center. There were poles on both sides of the street with long brackets to support the power wire grid. The d.c. motors on the trolley cars were energized from the 600 volt differential between the suspended trolley wire and the grounded track rails. The car motor made contact with the overhead circuit through a long trolley arm with a wheel or running shoe attached to the end. The circuit was completed to the track rail through the axles and wheels of the car. In the event the car changed direction, an alternate trolley rod on the other end of the car would be hooked up.

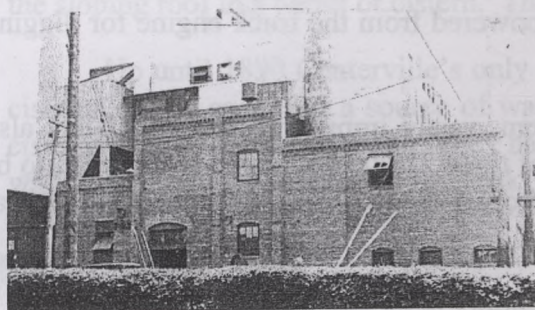
In 1904 there were financial problems caused by several events. A serious street car collision in which several people were injured, resulted in high settlements. The electric generator failed and was replaced with a used generator for \$1000. Also the gas mains on the square had to be replaced for the new paving. As a result, the company re-incorporated in April, 1905, as the **Centerville Light & Traction Co.**

In October, 1906, there was a violent explosion at the power plant resulting from accumulated gas at the old manufactured gas plant. In 1909, D.C. Bradley and Frank Payne bought all the capital stock from the Campbells, who lived in Chicago, and the company finally became locally owned.

The company continued to grow more involved with transportation beginning with electric interurban service to Mystic in 1910 and then the purchase and electrification of the railroad to Moravia in 1914. These railroads handled freight as well as passengers, and several large coal mines were established along the way.



Interurban car of 1910



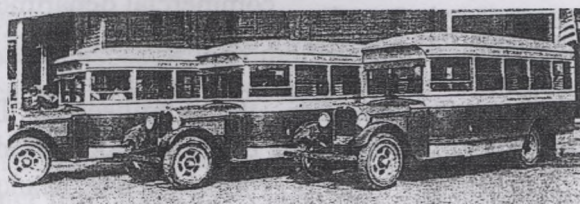
Centerville Power Plant

The power plant supplying this electricity was, at that time, one of the largest steam generators in Iowa, developing 1000 horse power, weighing 110,000 pounds and standing 19 feet high. The huge flywheel, revolving at high speed, if turned loose, would have sufficient momentum to carry it rolling through the business district, razing buildings in its path. The plant consumed 40 tons of coal per day, which evaporated 50,000 gallons (about 1000 barrels) of water into steam. The huge wheel powered three electric generators. It emitted a loud, high pitched whine, painful to the ears. Exhaust steam was used to heat the business district.

In 1916 the company changed its name to **Iowa Southern Utilities Co.** and launched itself on a course of acquisition of electric properties all over southern Iowa. In 1917 they purchased Leon, Mt. Ayr, Clearfield and Blockton to the west. This included a 33,000 volt transmission line between towns. In the next three years, it was Newton, Creston, Chariton, Osceola and Grinnell.

The year 1920 saw major rehabilitation of the Centerville power plant at 421 N. 13th St. with the installation of two 600-horsepower boilers, an 1875 KVA steam turbine, coal conveyers and bunkers, a 175 foot concrete stack, a condensing tower. Coal for this plant was purchased from coal mines in the Mystic area and in the north part of Centerville.

It was also in 1920 that the Iowa Southern general offices were moved from just south of the Continental Hotel to the J.A. Bradley building at 305 N. 13th St. on the east side of the square. Over a period of the next few years, all of the electric street cars were replaced with motor coach service at Burlington, Ottumwa and Centerville.



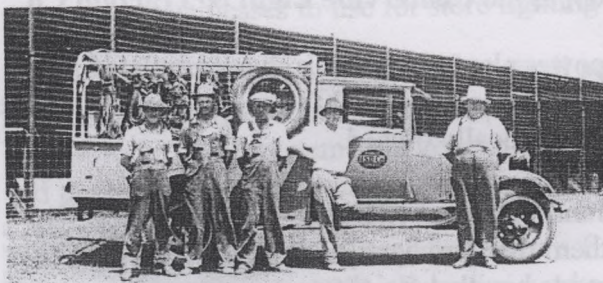
Motor coaches for bus service

Electric and Gas Service - continued

In 1925, Iowa Southern Utilities Company continued to expand with the acquisition of electric and/or manufactured gas systems in Burlington and Ottumwa. The Ottumwa purchase included a coal fired generating plant, on the north bank of the Des Moines River. In 1930 the company purchased the three-story building at 317 N. 13th, on the northeast corner of the Centerville square for its General Office and moved into the building in August.

Eventually there were enough people who owned automobiles to make mass transportation unprofitable. People loved the convenience of driving their own cars. So it was the end of an era. The buses were discontinued in Centerville in 1931 and in Ottumwa and Burlington in 1941. Interurban passenger service to Mystic and to Albia was also discontinued in 1933.

In 1947 the company began to purchase natural gas from pipelines instead of manufacturing the gas. The first towns were Washington, Burlington and Mt. Pleasant. Centerville was added in 1951.



A line crew in the 1940's

close it on the dirt and lift the dirt out. The first power digger was called a "monkey on a string" with a drill suspended on a frame and powered by a gasoline motor. This was all very crude compares to the trucks of today, equipped with baskets for high work or with large augers powered from the truck engine for digging deep holes.

Power line construction and maintenance work was slow and tedious in the 1940's. Linemen, then as now, were expected to brave all kinds of inclement weather, day and night, in order to restore electric service. Poles were climbed to do line work by strapping a pair of hooks (with a sharp point) to the linemen's shoes.

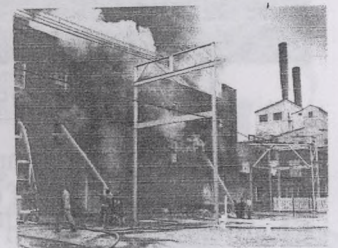
Holes were dug by hand with a digging tool called a jobber. The lineman would jamb it down into the hole, then

In 1950 Iowa Southern installed the two-way radio system, vastly improving service. They also announced plans to build their first large-scale generating station of three 23,000 kw units at Eddyville, to be called Bridgeport Station. These units were placed in operation from 1953 to 1957. Computerized central billing was added in Centerville in 1954.



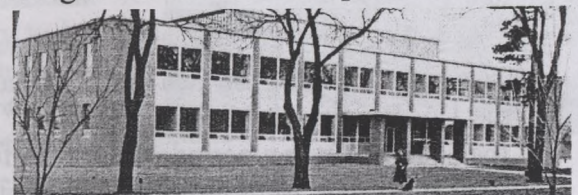
On March 30, 1957, a fire raged for hours in the 3-story brick annex to the company's general office building on the N.E. corner of the Square. An explosion of undetermined origin had started the fire. Loss was estimated at \$400,000.

1957 fire →



The picture on the left shows the area of the fire. The Courthouse can be seen in the upper left. The cooling towers for the generating plant are in the lower right. The 3-story main headquarters on the left side of the picture was not destroyed. There had been an enclosed overhead walkway between the two buildings and going to the annex, which burned. The annex had housed the company's engineering and commercial departments. The picture on the right was taken from a point south of the headquarters and shows the generating plant in the background.

After the fire, the Engineering Dept. was housed temporarily in a 1-story concrete block building just to the east. The company began to consider a new headquarters. A site was purchased at 300 Sheridan Ave. A new office was completed and occupied in 1960.



1960 ISU General Office

Electric and Gas Service -continued

Steam heating was finally discontinued in Centerville in 1961, unable to compete with natural gas. In 1963 the company installed a 6000 kw peaking plant in the north part of Centerville and announced plans to build a large base load generating station at Burlington. This plant went on line in 1968. Centerville peaking station →



In 1974 ISU announced plans to go into partnership with five other utilities to build a 675 MW generating station near Ottumwa, to be known as the Chilicothe Plant. In 1975 they also acquired a 28 % ownership in the new Neal plant at Sioux city. In 1981 they retired the old Bridgeport Plant and sold it to Cargill Inc. for conversion into a corn milling plant.

In 1991 Iowa Southern ceased to exist as it was merged into IES Industries of Cedar Rapids. This was the dramatic end of a long and successful era for this large home-based utility. Subsequently IES continued to expand until it was merged into Alliant Energy Co. with headquarters at Madison, Wisc.

After the merger, the unused headquarters office in Centerville became a telephone call center for reporting power outages, etc. In about 1992 the District headquarters for the Centerville area was relocated from the N.E. corner of the Square to a building vacated by Pamida on the S.E. corner of the intersection of Hwy. No. 5 and E. Haynes. This gave much more room for the pole yard, trucks and material storage. Retail sales of merchandise had also been discontinued.

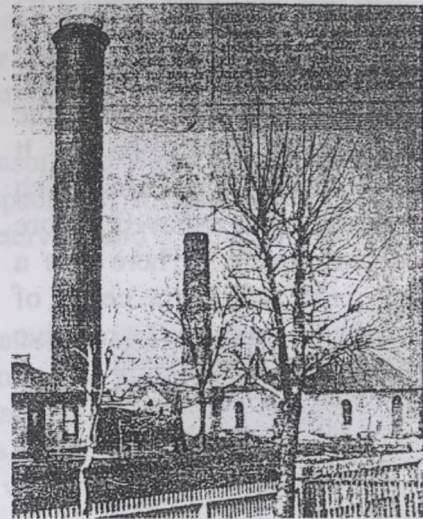
Centerville Water Utility

For some years after the county was settled, the pioneer residents of Centerville were dependent on nearby streams, springs and small wells for their water supply. Residents might also collect rain runoff from the sloping roof in a barrel or cistern. This was not sanitary as all kinds of debris could get into the water.

Up until 1890 Centerville's only source of water supply was private wells. The city built four large cisterns on the square as a source of water for hand use or fire engines during any business blazes. These cisterns existed for many years. They had to be pumped out when they filled with water. Also, a deep hole was drilled in the courtyard to seek a source of artesian water. Although the drilling went down over 2000 feet, the hole was never used. However, there were many wells in the downtown area. One of the last to remain was at the site of the former Iowa Trust and Savings Bank on the north side of the square.

In 1895, the population of Centerville was slightly over 4,000. The need for a public supply was apparent. The City gave the Centerville Water Co., formed by William Peatman, W. G. Clark and others, a 20-year franchise to install a water supply and distribution system. The firm contracted with J.P. Miller of Chicago to build the system. 1895 Water Plant →

The new 1895 plant was constructed at 902 S. 16th St. consisting of a power house, a steel standpipe, 12 x 100 feet with a capacity of 65,000 gallons, and an artesian well, 1540 feet deep. There were seven miles of pipe lines and 75 fire hydrants. The water mains may have been made of wood or asbestos, commonly used in those days. When first completed, the improvement cost \$65,000. The office was located at 301 ½ N. 13th.St.



The picture, taken at the corner of 16th & Terry Street, shows the standpipe for storing water and the smokestack for the steam boiler used for power to pump the water from the wells. The brick structure on the right housed the wells.