

HAWARDEN.... HOW IT ALL BEGAN

CITY LIGHTS

Chapter 15:

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Hawarden was booming. May 5, 1887 saw the first town election and the progress began.

In 1892 two individuals with a progressive vision applied for a franchise to build and operate an electrical light plant in town. They failed to gain enough support to receive the approval they needed, but their idea gave Hawarden the “push” they needed to investigate the possibility of a municipally owned electric light company.

The City Fathers awarded a contract to build an electric plant in conjunction with its municipal water system and on April 6, 1894 Hawarden’s Municipal Electric Utility began.

The Hawarden Centennial Book gives a very detailed report. For the readers who like to deal in technical terms, the plant was to consist essentially of a 600 light dynamo, a 50 horsepower engine and two boilers to match, wiring 900 commercial accounts and 40 street lights.

The City council also adopted electric rates which were based on the number of 16 candle power lights in use. This would be about the equivalent of a 10 or 15 watt lamp of today. A 10 or 15 watt lamp does not seem very bright in comparison to the lamps of today, but can you imagine the excitement and luxury they were to the pioneers of the 1800’s? The demand for this new luxury became so great that after the original plant was put into operation in April of 1894, it was forced to increase its capacity within two years. Hawarden was one of Iowa’s earliest Municipal Electric Systems because of the dreams and perseverance of the town’s early leaders. Another example of a city on the move.

The new dynamo was to have a capacity of 1500 lights, which indicates a rapid growth in the use of electricity for the town. As far back as 118 years ago, Hawarden was a leader in providing its citizens with municipally owned electricity and has continued the trend to have lower electricity rates than other

surrounding areas, and keeping the profits in the community to finance many improvements through the years.

The first electrical plant was a steam plant located in the center of town. Its location was directly across from the City Offices/ Community Center now located at 1150 Central Avenue. The old plant was famous for its huge smoke stack and the deep tone of the fire whistle sounding its warning

The plant continued to expand to meet the ever increasing demands of the rapidly growing community. A 75KW and 100KW generating units were added as well as increased boiler capacity. By 1924 it became apparent that the original steam plant was becoming obsolete and needed to be replaced.

The new plant was built on higher ground at 724 Seventh St. and was completed in 1925. The capacity of the new plant reflected the innovative planning of the city council. The new plant was more than double the capacity of the old plant. It consisted of two Fulton Diesel generating units, 300 and 400 Horsepower with 200KW and 272 KW generators respectively.

Even the progressive planning of the City Council of 1926 could not foresee the demand for electricity. In 1928 the plant loads were beyond capacity and it was necessary to add another unit. This time it was a 750 HP Fulton Diesel with a 500KW generator.

In May of 1936, an article appeared in the Sioux City Journal titled "Taxpayers Paradise". It reported that through the first six years of diesel operation, the new plant in Hawarden, paid for all expenditures amounting to approximately \$160,000.00 plus salaries and other operating expenses. It not only accomplished the complete reduction of indebtedness, but the municipal tax levy was reduced from \$19,500.00 in 1926 to no levy of any kind in 1931, and no tax levy was made until at least 1936 for the operation of the Hawarden city government.

The years surrounding WWII were challenging for the operators and equipment of the plant. Plans were made for further expansion in 1941, but the impending war made it impossible to obtain equipment. As a result of this, the plant loads would frequently exceed the total plant capacity. During these periods only emergency repairs were possible and preventative maintenance was impossible. With the diligent attention given to the plant by its supervisors and employees, it emerged from this period without serious effects, and in 1946 a

fourth unit was installed. This was a 960HP Fulton Diesel with a 670 KW generator. The last of these engines was still running in the early 1990's.

Through the years since Hawarden had the vision of creating a municipal electric utility, the proceeds from this utility have helped increase the quality of life in our town. Some of these improvements are as follows: new pillars for Grace Hill Cemetery, colored strings of street light decorations for Main Street, purchase of an airport site on the edge of the city, modern pumper truck and firefighting equipment, flood lights for the tennis courts, outdoor skating rinks, and considerable paving projects without assessments to the property owners. The proceeds from Hawarden's Municipal Utilities continue to keep the equipment updated, as well as provide other improvements for the town.

Hawarden continues to operate its Municipal Utilities including, electric, water, gas, and its municipal communications utility, bringing telephone services, internet access and cable television to the citizens of Hawarden. This occurred as a result of a municipal election in 1994, with 44% of the residents voting giving a 95.6% approval rating to establish the new utility. As a result of this vote, Hawarden became a pioneer in changing the way the state and nation regulated the communications industry.