

Once Upon a Time There was a Taxless Town Colby's Power Plant

(NOTE: The following story was written by Theo Kleinsorge, a junior at Colby High School, for his Honors English III class. The research paper assignment was to cover a subject from the early part of the 20th century. His teacher, Shelly Myers, attended the "Developing Community Character" workshop conducted by the museum last summer. She encouraged her students to research a 'local' story. Theo was the only student to do a local story and we are tickled that he shared it with us.)

Many of the biggest changes in American History occurred during the dawn of the 20th century. One of these changes was the invention of the light bulb by Thomas Edison. This sparked an entire revolution in communities across the country as they started to get electrical power and water works systems. During this revolution in energy, a small town in western Kansas began thinking about getting electrical power and water works.

In 1909, Colby, Kansas already had electricity. That is, homes and businesses, like the Opera House, could make their own electricity with a gas generator. But in order to keep up with the times, Colby was challenged to install a public power plant and water works. What seemed to be an extremely oppressive debt for a frivolous luxury turned out not only to be a blessing to the community, but brought a distinction to its citizens as well.

In the early 1900s, citizens in the city of Colby began kicking around the idea of getting a water works system and even an electric power plant. On October 22, 1909, the Colby Commercial Club, much like today's Chamber of Commerce, called for a meeting to consider water works and electric lights for Colby. At the time of the meeting the opinion of the Commercial Club and newspaper was that nobody in the town of Colby actually understood how convenient running water and electric lighting really was (CT 10/21/1909).

Attending the meeting was Mr. McDonnell, an engineer from a Kansas City firm, who discussed with the club different systems that could be put into place. At the meeting a resolution was passed asking the city council to put the water and light question to a vote. The club saw what the advantages of water works and lighting included in bringing Colby up to date from a little country town to a city and make it look great, increasing the value of real estate, and having a wonderful convenience (CT 10/28/1909).

In response to the resolution to put the issue to a vote, the city council requested a meeting of their own with Mr. McDonnell to be fully informed on the subject with estimates of the project. The council was in no hurry to put the issue to a vote until they felt it was researched and fully looked into (CT 11/25/09).

Early in December, the city council put the matter to a vote. The council decided to propose bonds of around \$55,000 to voters in January 1910. Because Colby was growing, the council decided upon a system that was large enough to handle a town 2.5 times the size of Colby because the councilmen didn't think it wise to have to pass more bonds in the near future to expand the plant (CT 12/9/1909). Only men would have the chance to vote on the matter. Women had the right to vote in local elections but not on bond proposals (CT 1/20/1910).

At this time the opinion of the newspaper was rather bleak. Many supporters felt that unless there was a drastic change of opinion, Colby would vote down the bonds. Upon questioning, one man agreed saying, I don't think there is anyone in Colby competent enough to cope with such a big proposition (CT 1/20/1910). However, on January 27, 1910, the voters went to the polls. After the votes were tallied the bonds carried 189 to 44 (CT 2/3/1910).

Bids for the plant were opened May 5th. The plant was estimated to take three months to install, and would consist of a water works system with pumping, water storage, and distribution systems and an electric generator for lighting. The plant was not yet determined to be gas or steam. The entire plant would be in duplicate equipped with the best equipment at the lowest cost. It would employ 50 to 75 men (CT 1/20/1910).

The electric lighting portion of the plant was considered rather vast for the beginning system. It was said by the councilmen and engineers to have the very best material and the most modern

material throughout. In the plan, Colby would be lit with a series of arc lights and tungsten lamps (CT 1/20/1910).

Ground-breaking for the plant was on June 9, 1910 and was completed by November 24, 1910. On Thanksgiving in 1910, the electric lights were turned on. Several houses and businesses had been wired to receive electric power already (CT 12/1/1910). Authorities made their final checks and gave control of the plant to Colby for good on January 13, 1911. Because the plant was in duplicate, there was no possibility of the current being shut off because of breakdowns anywhere, according to the engineers (CT 1/19/1911).

By September of 1911, about one year after the plant opened, electric lights had been installed in many homes and almost every business because people in town no longer saw electricity as a convenience but as a necessity. Colby, however, still did not have all night electrical service. The generators were shut off at midnight every evening which meant that kerosene lamps still needed to be kept on hand for late night work. To warn people of the cutoff time the lights blinked fifteen minutes before midnight (*Dimmit* 53).

Then in February of 1921, an election was held to raise \$60,000 to enlarge the City Light Plant which was too small to carry the load needed (CFP 2/3/1921). The bond carried with a vote of 259 to 22. An improvement made on the system was the White Way. The White Way was composed of a series of light clusters on each corner of main street (CFP 2/17/1921). Another improvement took place in September with the arrival of two 200 horsepower diesel engines (CFP 9/15/1921). This addition made the plant in Colby one of the best in the state.

At this point in time the Power Plant had begun to furnish light to many of the surrounding communities such as Levant, Brewster, Menlo, Hoxie, Gem, Rexford, and Selden (CFP 9/15/1921). With these additions, came the need for a bigger engine. In December of 1924, the city bought a new 600 horsepower diesel engine, at a cost of \$49,360 to cover the load being made upon the two 200 horsepower engines (CFP 12/18/1924).

With all of the expansions of the power plant, the selling of electric power to the surrounding communities was made possible, and the plant's success was ensured. This was the turning point of the finances of Colby.

After the instillation of the 200 horse engines, the \$11,000 deficit began to diminish. In August of 1922, the deficits were completely paid off and a surplus began accumulating. In 1921 and 1922, the electric power being sold over the transmission lines made enough from its revenue to pay for the plant's expenses. (*Benson*).

The surplus grew under careful management by the city and the plant broke many monthly earnings. Soon when most towns were trying to figure out how to pay off their outstanding debts, Colby had to decide what to do with the surplus. Because of the surplus, the city cut power prices for citizens of the city of Colby (*Benson*).

In 1928, the city council passed a resolution to wave any tax levies for city expenses. Citizens of Colby still had national and state taxes, but without local taxes, there was a 40% reduction in their taxes (CFPT 5/17/1928). Colby was one of few cities nationwide to wave a tax levy and became a marvel of the state. Communities all over the nation used Colby as a model, and newspapers around the country wrote stories about Colby as a taxless town. People all over the country were very interested in what Colby's plant was doing (CFPT 5/31/1928).

In the 1930s the nation was hit with the Great Depression. This hurt many communities in the Colby area, including Colby. Colby, however, wasn't hit drastically. In April of 1930 the city needed a new engine for the power plant. The city was able to buy the new engine with cash on hand. This ability and the taxless town status made Colby citizens feel pretty good about the state of the community during the Depression (CFPT 4/17/1930).

After World War II the power plant again needed to upgrade to keep up with the rising demands of Colby. To continue to use the power plant as a means of remaining a taxless town, bonds were passed and new equipment for the plant was purchased (*Benson*).

During this postwar period, the city voted on a new style of management and adopted the city manager type of government with commissioners. Also in 1945 was the startup of the Central Kansas

Power Company, with power plants in Colby, Hays, and other towns. The C. K. P. Company's plants outperformed the current Colby municipal plant and took the surrounding communities off Colby's power plant load (*Wingo 109*). These two factors caused the discontinuation of the power plant as a real profit making device thus Colby lost its taxless town status.

The achievement of Colby's taxless town status was thought of very highly by the people who lived there. Though Colby lost its taxless town status, the community had nothing to be ashamed of. The change went hand in hand with postwar prosperity . . . a prosperity that brought other advantages from which Colby continued to grow and succeed.