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## The best of its kind in the West: A history of Columbus, Nebraska, 1900-1910

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**“THE BEST OF ITS KIND IN THE WEST”  
A HISTORY OF COLUMBUS, NEBRASKA, 1900-1910**

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of History

and the

Faculty of the Graduate College

University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

University of Nebraska at Omaha

by

Lori Brdicko

May 1999

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

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“THE BEST OF ITS KIND IN THE WEST”  
A HISTORY OF COLUMBUS, NEBRASKA, 1900-1910

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University of Nebraska, 1999

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The first decade of the twentieth century marked Columbus, Nebraska's transition from a frontier town to a small midwestern city. During those ten years, the population increased from 3,522 to 5,014, the labor force composition changed, and residents, goaded by *Columbus Weekly Telegram* editor Edgar Howard, began to think more about the appearance and sanitary condition of the town.

The rapidly growing community was soon hard-pressed to provide its citizens with fuel and electrical power to operate an expanding residential and street lighting system. Promoters tried to harness the Loup River's current to provide that power, but economic conditions did not favor the project. The electric light station could not provide enough power for the streetlights and business and residential lighting.

Residents began taking exception to the poor condition of the city's streets and sidewalks, and those issues reached crisis points when Columbus qualified for

free city mail delivery. Automobile enthusiasts began adding their voices to the demand for good roads at mid-decade, but in doing so, created new forms of safety hazards.

Along with the automobile, increased usage of the telephone during the decade gave people more opportunities for interaction, and began to change the way people, especially those living in the rural areas, conducted their business. Although these devices were lauded as means to end the isolation of rural people, during the first years after their introduction, they were enjoyed far more frequently by town-dwellers.

## Acknowledgments

Many people have been invaluable to the completion of this project. I especially wish to thank Katherine Barnett, Diane Davis, and Angela Kroegar for reading several versions of each chapter. I would also like to thank my parents and grandparents for their knowledge of Columbus and the surrounding area, Marc Davis for the use of his scanner, and other family, friends, and coworkers for listening to my ramblings about the project's progress.

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# A Decade of Growth

## Chapter 1

Before Columbus's first permanent settlers arrived, four bills were introduced in Nebraska's First Territorial Legislature to ensure that a settlement would arise at the fork of the Platte and Loup rivers. The first allowed for a railroad corridor, the second for a ferry to cross the often dangerously turbulent Loup River, the third for assistance for homesteaders, and the fourth for a bridge over the Loup River.<sup>1</sup> The first permanent settlers were a group of German immigrants who came to the area from Columbus, Ohio by way of Omaha in 1857. The town was incorporated as a city of the second class on February 11, 1865. Construction of the Union Pacific's mainline in 1866 began attracting settlers to Columbus, and extension of its branch lines several years later added to the town's importance as a railroad hub. (See Figure 1.1, p. 35)

In 1870, Columbus boasted only 526 people.<sup>2</sup> The town's largest growth period began soon after the 1870 enumeration, and in 1880, Columbus reported a

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<sup>1</sup>Martha M. Turner, *Our Own History: Columbus, Nebraska, 1541 - 1860* (Columbus, NE: Art Printery, 1936), 49.

<sup>2</sup>U.S. Census Bureau, *Ninth Census of the United States, 1870*, vol. I: Population (Washington: GPO, 1872), p. 197.

population of 2,131--an increase of more than 300 percent.<sup>3</sup> Growth over the next two decades followed the same patterns as most other “frontier” towns: a moderate population increase between 1880 and 1890, and a smaller increase during the less prosperous 1890 to 1900 decade. The return to prosperity by 1900 renewed the influx of settlers. Columbus received its share of people who planned to permanently reside in the town and those who were just stopping there for a year or two awaiting their next golden opportunity elsewhere. The large increase in its population meant that Columbus’s systems of transportation, communication, and delivery of goods and services rapidly became inadequate.

The process of providing adequate services to Columbus’s growing population often created tension among diverse groups of citizens. The result was a community that was no longer a pioneer settlement, but a mature midwestern town. Columbus’s municipal government followed the mayor/council system based on the structure of the Federal government that was used by most towns and cities in Nebraska. The mayor’s office served as the executive branch, the police judge headed the judicial branch, and the City Council became the legislative branch. Departments like the Street Commissioner’s office, the Fire Department, and the Police Department reported to the City Council.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>U.S. Census Office, *Compendium of the Tenth Census* (Washington: GPO, 1883), p. 218.

<sup>4</sup>Addison Erwin Sheldon, *Nebraska Civil Government* (Lincoln: The University Publishing Company, 1924), pp. 202-204.

At the turn of the century, Columbus had a population of 3,522, which was 19.85 percent of Platte County's population of 17,747.<sup>5</sup> The local economy was growing, and several new residences and businesses were under construction, and many more businesses were making additions or remodeling existing structures. Population increase remained an important issue to town boosters throughout the 1900 to 1910 decade. Edgar Howard, editor of the Columbus *Telegram* from 1900 until his death in 1951, became one of the town's most avid and vocal boosters from the moment he assumed ownership and editorship of the newspaper. Even during his leaves-of-absence from active participation on the paper to further his political career, he was an ardent champion of "the little man."<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the decade, the *Telegram's* reports of new arrivals and overcrowded schools reflected citizens' desire to have Columbus become the third largest town in the state. Nebraska's population did not increase greatly between 1890 and 1900 due to drought and low farm prices. After 1900, most of Nebraska's population growth occurred in its cities as new immigrants arrived and

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<sup>5</sup>United States Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1900, vol. 1: Population, part 1* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1901), p.260.

<sup>6</sup>J.R. Johnson, *Representative Nebraskans* (Lincoln, NE: Johnsen Publishing Company, 1954), p.102. For a detailed study of Edgar Howard's political career, see William E. Christensen, *The Legislative Career of Edgar Howard* (masters thesis, University of Nebraska), 1955.

rural settlers sold their land and moved into the population centers.<sup>7</sup> The validity of the 1890 Nebraska federal census has been called into question since there is overwhelming evidence that Omaha and several other cities reported inflated populations during that enumeration.<sup>8</sup> Columbus did not report grossly inflated figures on its census returns, but padded its population figures by including the entire township in its returns for “Columbus city.” The discrepancy can be found by comparing statistics for portions of the population calculated from the manuscript census with the figures in the published census material.

When the results of the 1900 federal enumeration were announced, Columbus citizens were disappointed. They had expected a population close to five thousand, or at least four thousand. Instead, the official report was 3,522.<sup>9</sup> It was particularly frustrating since they compared that figure to the growth that other towns had reported for the 1890 enumeration. To promote the town’s attractive power, over the next several years, the *Telegram*, the weekly local newspaper with which the City Council had a contract to publish official announcements, cheerfully reported new arrivals to the town, especially professionals who set up new services.

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<sup>7</sup>James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 244.

<sup>8</sup>Edgar Z. Palmer, “The Correctness of the 1890 Census of Population for Nebraska Cities,” *Nebraska History* vol. XXXII no. 4 (December, 1951).

<sup>9</sup>United States *Twelfth Census of the United States 1900* Volume I: Population, Part 1 (Washington, D.C., 1901), p. 260.

During the first half of the 1900 to 1910 decade, town officials relied upon school censuses to estimate Columbus' growth. The 1902 end-of-term census showed 1,370 students, fifty more than the 1901 report.<sup>10</sup> During the 1903 to 1904 school year, twenty-one families with fifty-eight school-age children moved into Columbus, boosting the school census to 1,414 in July, 1904. A rough estimate of the total population can be attained by multiplying the school census by three. In 1904, this would have given Columbus a population of 4,242. The *Telegram* advised that by including the people just outside the city limits, the town's population could be figured at about five thousand.<sup>11</sup>

In 1905, the city contracted the school enumerator, John Schmocker, to take an unofficial town census, just to satisfy Columbus' collective curiosity. The *Telegram* estimated a population of four thousand.<sup>12</sup> Schmocker reported a population of 4,002 (give or take fifty) at the end of June, 1905. Many citizens had been expecting a much higher number since there had been so many new arrivals during the past five years. What people did not consider, was that many of the new arrivals had been the result of the Union Pacific (UP) and Burlington railroad companies transferring and promoting workers, so the arrival of a new person who had accepted a job in town usually meant the departure of the person

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<sup>10</sup>*Columbus Weekly Telegram*, July 11, 1902, p.1.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, July 8, 1904, p.1.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, June 2, 1905, p.5.

who had formerly held the position.

Two years later, Columbus needed more money to improve its storm water sewer system. So, to determine if Columbus qualified for reclassification as a “city of the first class,” which would make it eligible for state funding for a sewer system project, the City Council once again employed John Schmocker to conduct an enumeration of Platte County, which was to begin on June 1, 1907.<sup>13</sup> Estimates of county population ranged from eighteen thousand to twenty thousand. When the results came in in mid-July, 1907, Platte County had a population of 18,983, and Columbus a population of 5,082. When the data was analyzed, it showed that many people had been moving from farms into the towns, so while Columbus and most of the other towns around the county had grown, the county as a whole had not gained much over the previous census.<sup>14</sup> Because this unofficial census showed that Columbus qualified as a city of the first class, town officials appealed to the state for an official enumeration. When the results were tabulated in September, 1907, the official report was that Columbus did indeed have a population of 5,082 and qualified as a city of the first class.<sup>15</sup> On September 25, 1907, Mayor George W. Phillips placed Columbus on the record as

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., April 19, 1907, p.1.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., July 12, 1907, p.4.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., September 13, 1907, p.5.

a city of the first class.<sup>16</sup>

Different election regulations existed for cities of the first class than for smaller municipalities. Term in office discrepancies caused considerable confusion for Columbus's voters. The current City Council had been elected earlier that year, and under the regulations for a city of the second class, should have had a term of two years, so the next election had been scheduled for 1909. Cities of the first class were required to hold annual elections, although elected officials had two-year terms, and candidates were required to post one thousand dollars bond for qualification.<sup>17</sup> There was considerable debate about whether to elect a new City Council the following spring, or to allow the current Council to serve its full term. Columbus officials decided to go by the book and hold an election for city officials the next spring. All officials who sought reelection were retained in office.

As a city of the first class, Columbus needed four election precincts instead of the three which existed prior to the enumeration of 1907. Most of the territory for the new fourth ward of the city was taken from the northern portions of the second and third wards, although officials took some territory from the populous first ward to equalize population throughout all the districts.<sup>18</sup> Several

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<sup>16</sup>Margaret Curry, *The History of Platte County, Nebraska*, (Culver City, CA: Murray and Gek, 1950), 416.

<sup>17</sup>Nebraska, *Revised Statutes of Nebraska, 1913* (Lincoln, NE: State Journal Co., Printers, 1914), p. 1386.

<sup>18</sup>*Telegram*, January 24, 1908, p.1.



city officials got raises, the office of Fourth Ward Councillor would appear on the spring ballot for those residing in the city, and a space for the office of Register of Deeds would appear on the county ballot the next fall since Platte County's population had exceeded eighteen thousand. (See Figures 1.2 and 1.3, p. 36).

After the initial excitement of reclassification had faded, the citizens of Columbus soon realized that a larger town required more money, and that the financial burden of running a Nebraska city of the first class ultimately fell to them. Property values had been climbing steadily since 1903 when local officials realized that residents were withholding information about personal property and reassessed the entire town.<sup>19</sup> Now that Columbus had been reclassified, city officials were planning another reassessment.

The *Telegram* gave its readers a hint that their elected officials were planning to raise their taxes. An editorial in October, 1907 stated that one benefit of the town's reclassification was a clearer procedure covering where money came from for public works.<sup>20</sup> Despite these warnings, few citizens were prepared for the sharp increase in their tax rates after Columbus was reclassified. When Columbus became a city of the first class, the City Council was empowered to impose higher taxes, up to fifteen mills per dollar, for the purpose

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<sup>19</sup>*Telegram*, June 5, 1903, p.1.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, October 4, 1907, p.1.

of general revenue.<sup>21</sup> As a city of the second class, the Council had been limited to a ten mill on the dollar tax for general revenue.<sup>22</sup>

Columbus citizens first felt the weight of their new responsibilities in June, 1908. Angry taxpayers besieged the County Board with complaints during the week ending Friday, June 12. There had been so many complaints of such a vehement nature that the Board was considering a reassessment of the entire city.<sup>23</sup> A week later, almost two hundred Columbus residents had filed complaints of excessive taxation with the County Board of Equalization. The committee charged with evaluating these claims announced that most complainants' assessments would be reduced, but some would stand, and some would even be raised.<sup>24</sup>

The next year, taxes were raised by about eleven mills (slightly more than one cent per dollar). The *Telegram* was able to explain to property owners how to figure out how much they could expect to pay, but claimed not to have any knowledge why taxes had been raised.<sup>25</sup>

Higher taxes were not the only negative consequences of municipal

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<sup>21</sup>Nebraska, *The Revised Statutes of Nebraska, 1913* (Lincoln: State Journal Co., Printers, 1914), p. 1376. A mill is 1/10 of a cent.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 1452.

<sup>23</sup>*Telegram*, June 12, 1908, p.1.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., June 19, 1908, p.1.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., August 6, 1909, p.1.

reclassification. At the beginning of April, 1908, saloon patrons learned that *all* liquor vending establishments would have to be closed down for three days in the middle of the month. Columbus's new City Council could not meet until the Tuesday following its election due to the provisions governing a city of the first class, and the old Council's term ended three days sooner than that, due to the provisions governing a city of the second class. During this time, all the saloon licenses in the city expired, and could not be renewed until the new Council's first meeting. To avoid such inconveniences in the future, the outgoing Council set the new fiscal year as April 14, 1908 to April 13, 1909, and determined that elections were to be held no later than April 7, 1909. This way, such unpleasantness as having all the saloon licenses expire three days before they could be renewed would be avoided.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the town's problems with taxation, residents still hoped that the 1910 federal census would show a large population increase from the 1907 state enumeration. As the federal enumeration process was nearing completion, the *Telegram* advised its subscribers who had not been at home when the enumerators came by to call the newspaper's office so the staff could relay the information to the enumerators.<sup>27</sup> Encouraged by the results of the 1907 census, the *Telegram* editor was predicting a population of at least six thousand. Unofficial results

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., April 10, 1908, p.5.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., May 6, 1910, p.7.

reported in mid-July gave Columbus a population of 5,522, and the 1910 federal enumeration of Columbus reported the population as 5,014, a slight reduction from the number reported in 1907.<sup>28</sup> Although that total fell short of the *Telegram* editor's expectations, it was still a 42.36 percent increase from the 1900 total of 3,522.

Columbus's early potential for grandeur included chances to become not only the state capital, but also the national capital. After the Civil War, George Francis Train, a promoter of many business ventures, was one of the individuals who recognized the vulnerability of the national capital on the eastern seaboard. He believed that the national capital should be as near to the geographical center of the nation as possible and located on a transcontinental railroad. While on a promotional tour for the Union Pacific Railroad Company in late 1866, Train claimed that Columbus would one day become the national capital.<sup>29</sup> Columbus historian and newspaper editor Martha Turner speculated that Train's prediction did not come to pass because the early settlers had not given him enough encouragement due to their preference for a quiet, modestly sized town rather than a large, bustling capital city.<sup>30</sup>

Relocation of the state capital was a much more serious issue for most

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<sup>28</sup>*Telegram*, July 22, 1910, p.5, and *Thirteenth Census of the United States*, p.70.

<sup>29</sup>J.R. Johnson, *Representative Nebraskans* (Lincoln, NE: Johnsen Publishing Company, 1954), p.186.

<sup>30</sup>Turner, *Our Own History*, p.70.

Nebraskans. Historian Addison Sheldon listed Columbus among the top contenders for the title, along with Lincoln, Kearney, Grand Island, Clarks, and Central City. Other sources disagree with this list, claiming that Bellevue was the only city other than Lincoln seriously considered, despite its proximity to Omaha and earlier failure to become the territorial capital.<sup>31</sup> Sheldon claimed that the smaller cities lost their chance at becoming the state capital chiefly because skillful lobbyists from Lincoln succeeded in playing them off each other.<sup>32</sup>

Passed over for the honor of becoming the state and national capital, Columbus boosters had to be content with their town's status as county seat of Platte County. Columbus has an unusual location for a county seat community. Instead of being located near the center of the county, providing equidistant travel for most residents, Columbus is located near the southeast corner of Platte County, within five miles of both the Platte and the Loup rivers. (See Figure 1.4, p. 37) That was an ideal location for a settlement in the pre-railroad era when the primary routes for overland travel followed the course of the Platte River, but it began to become a problem when other communities formed, and people had to travel from the northern corners of the county to conduct their business. In the years before reliable automobiles and a good road system

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<sup>31</sup>Donald R. Hickey, *Nebraska Moments: Glimpses of Nebraska's Past* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), p.\*\*\*\*\*

<sup>32</sup>Addison Erwin Sheldon, *Nebraska: The Land and the People* vol. I (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1931), 498.

developed, residents of the townships farthest from Columbus resented the extra distance they had to travel to conduct their legal business, especially if their communities did not have rail service. Residents of Walker, Woodville, and St. Bernard townships especially resented the long trip over bad roads to conduct legal business in Columbus. When the Platte County Courthouse needed to be replaced, boosters from communities in these townships led a campaign against the bonds to build a new courthouse in Columbus.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Platte County's wooden Courthouse, built in 1870, was in need of extensive repair or replacement. It was structurally unsound, and did not have adequate space for offices or for storage of valuable records. In 1901, the Platte County Board of Supervisors introduced a measure to put a bond issue for a new courthouse building on the next county election ballot.<sup>33</sup> Discussion of the issue in Columbus left many "city" people believing that all farmers would be opposed to the idea of a new courthouse building, so *Telegram* editor Edgar Howard and County Treasurer John G. Becher took an informal poll of the first ten farmers that they met on the street. Nine of the ten agreed that the county needed a new courthouse badly, but most of them qualified their agreement by stating that they wished that it would be built in a town closer to their farms.<sup>34</sup> The issue generated enough

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<sup>33</sup>*Telegram*, March 15, 1901, p.1.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, November 29, 1901, p.1.

interest for a special election to be called. In March, 1902, the Board of Supervisors encouraged all Platte County voters to participate in a special election, which would be held on June 3, to decide whether to issue bonds for a new court house.<sup>35</sup> A later notice for the election said that the ballot was to include decisions on whether to issue the bonds and to levy taxes for sixty-five thousand dollars to pay for a new court house.<sup>36</sup>

Over the next several months, the *Telegram* frequently ran editorials supporting the bond issue for the new building. It usually described the current building as a “dangerous disgrace,” and refuted claims from opponents of the bond issue who charged that the city was trying to get county money to use for its own, undefined, purposes. Despite the newspaper’s denial of the claims that Columbus officials were trying to siphon money from the county, whenever the *Telegram* promoted the idea of a new court house, it always did so in reference to Columbus rather than to Platte County. It probably alienated more non-Columbus voters than it won by trivializing their desire for a court house closer to their homes by implying that they just wanted it “located in their own backyards” out of laziness and to avoid the inconvenience of a trip to Columbus.<sup>37</sup> During the week before the election, people were still arguing that

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., March 21, 1902, p.8.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., April 18, 1902, p.8.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., April 11, 1902, p.2.

the court house needed to be relocated. John G. Regan from Platte Center claimed that his town should have had the court house because it was the source of more litigation than all the other towns in Platte County combined.<sup>38</sup>

Three days after the election, the *Telegram* was mourning the defeat of the bond issue, and blaming the result of the election on the apathy of Columbus voters. In a heated editorial predicting dire consequences for Columbus, the newspaper explained that boosters from Platte Center and Humphrey had formed a coalition to defeat the bond measure. Each group planned to donate large sums of money to campaigns to move the court house to its own community if the proposed bond issue were defeated. The editorial warned Columbus citizens that the boosters from the other towns were aggressive enough that Columbus was in danger of losing the county seat and the privileges that went with it. To prevent that and other losses, the newspaper charged Columbus citizens to stop their factionalism and pursue financing for a new court house more aggressively.<sup>39</sup>

In a slightly more objective article summarizing the county voting patterns, the *Telegram* again attributed the defeat of the bond issue to the poor turnout of Columbus voters and the aggressive boosters from communities in the northwestern part of the county.<sup>40</sup> However, analysis of the voting statistics and

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., May 30, 1902, p.1.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., June 6, 1902, p.4.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p.1.



census data shows that the *Telegram's* inflammatory editorials were only its own brand of boosterism, because even if all of Columbus's voters had cast their ballots in favor of the bond issue, it would still have been defeated--Columbus did not have a large enough voting population in comparison to the rest of the county to carry the election by itself. Chief among the *Telegram's* complaints was that only half of Columbus's eligible voters had participated in the election.<sup>41</sup> What it failed to mention was that the same was true of the rest of the county. Of the 4,525 eligible voters in Platte County only 2,270, or 50 percent, voted in the special bond election. Columbus voters were far from indifferent about the issue, and voted overwhelmingly in favor of the bonds, although they did not achieve quite as high a percentage in favor of the bond issue as the outlying areas of the county did against it. (See Figure 1.5, p. 38)

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

**Results of the June 3, 1902 Court House Bond election (figure 1.6)<sup>42</sup>**

<b>Voting Precinct</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>% of precinct votes cast</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>% of precinct votes cast</b>
Columbus 1st Ward	194	94.63%	11	5.37%
Columbus 2nd Ward	143	94.08%	9	5.92%
Columbus 3rd Ward	118	89.39%	14	10.61%
Columbus Township	51	82.26%	11	17.74%
Bismark Township	14	42.42%	19	57.58%
Sherman Township	14	20.00%	56	80.00%
Creston Township	10	8.26%	111	91.74%
Shell Creek Township	22	27.50%	58	72.50%
Grand Prairie Township	4	4.00%	96	96.00%
Humphrey Township	4	2.96%	131	97.04%
Butler Township	53	84.13%	10	15.87%
Loup Township	17	48.57%	18	51.43%
Lost Creek Township	5	2.55%	191	97.45%
Burrows Township	2	1.72%	114	98.28%
Granville Township	12	5.13%	222	94.87%
Monroe Township	9	9.89%	82	90.11%
Joliet Township	2	1.57%	125	98.43%
St. Bernard Township	10	6.85%	136	93.15%
Woodville Township	5	9.26%	49	90.74%
Walker Township	1	0.85%	117	99.15%
<b>Total Votes Cast</b>	<b>690</b>	<b>30.40%</b>	<b>1580</b>	<b>69.60%</b>

If the bond issue had received all of Columbus's votes, it would have had only 1,286 in favor of the issue, compared to 1,535 against it--assuming that the rest of the county would not also have had a better turnout. Except for Columbus city and township, only Butler Township had voted a clear majority for the bonds, and Loup and Bismark townships had split almost evenly. If those who had favored the issue, but had not cast ballots had voted (assuming the same proportions of votes among non-voters), the bond issue still would have failed.

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

The extra ballots would only have brought the number of positive votes up to 1,370. Columbus did not have a large enough population compared to the rest of the county to carry an issue by itself or with very little help from other communities, and would not have a large enough percentage of the county's total population to do so until 1960.

**Population: Columbus vs. Platte County (Figure 1.7)**<sup>43</sup>

	Platte County's Population	Columbus's Population	Columbus's Percentage of Total Population
1900	17,747	3522	19.85
1910	19,006	5014	26.38
1920	19,464	5410	27.79
1930	21,181	6898	32.57
1940	20,191	7632	37.80
1950	19,910	8884	44.62
1960	23,992	12,476	52.00
1970	26,508	15,471	58.36

Soon after the defeat of the bond issue, the faction that wanted to move the court house from Columbus announced that it was going to circulate a petition to seek endorsement for putting the matter up for popular vote. Charles Swallow, leader of the faction, claimed that his group would be satisfied with the results of such an election, whatever the outcome.<sup>44</sup> If the anti-Columbus court

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<sup>43</sup>Compiled from United States, Bureau of the Census, *Population 1900, Vol. I, Part I*, pp.464-465; *Population 1910, Vol. III*, p.34; *Fourteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1920, Vol. III, Population* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1923), pp. 601, 605; *Fifteenth Census of the United States: 1930, Population, Vol. III, Part 2* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1932), pp. 79, 121; *Sixteenth Census of the United States: 1940, Vol.II, Part 4 Characteristics of the Population* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1943), pp. 612, 687; *Seventeenth Decennial Census of the United States, Census of Population: 1950, Vol. II, Characteristics of the Population, Part 27, Nebraska* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1952), p.16; *Eighteenth Decennial Census of the United States, Census of Population: 1960, Vol. I, Characteristics of the Population, Part 29, Nebraska* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1961), p.16; *1970 Census of Population, Vol. I, Characteristics of the Population, Part A, Section 2* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1972), p.27.

<sup>44</sup>Telegram, June 13, 1902, p.1.

house faction ever circulated its petition, it did not get enough support to be placed on a ballot, and the issue of moving the court house from Columbus did not get any more editorial attention.

Over the next four years, the idea that Columbus needed a new court house would resurface occasionally, usually in connection with dog licensing or when parts of the structure were repaired. The *Telegram* usually addressed the issue in terms of Columbus's need for a new court house rather than as a need of the entire county. Evasion of the dog licensing tax was a chronic condition in turn-of-the-century Columbus, and whenever a particularly large pack of unlicensed dogs roamed the town, the *Telegram* would suggest that if all the dogs were licensed, a large, expensive project like the court house or power canal would be completely funded.

The Platte County Board of Supervisors began thinking about the need for a new court house more seriously in 1906 when the current building ran out of storage space for records. Early in the year, someone had suggested moving County Judge John Ratterman's office out of the court house to free up some space. In March, the Board decided not to relocate Ratterman's office out of consideration for people who came from other parts of the county and wanted to get their business conducted as quickly as possible.<sup>45</sup>

Five months later, space had become so scarce in the court house that the

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., March 16, 1906, p.1.

Board had little choice but to vote in favor of moving Judge Ratterman's offices elsewhere. The Board chose the upper floor of the German National Bank for the judge's new offices because it had a fire-proof vault for his records. The *Telegram* interpreted the relocation of Judge Ratterman's offices as a step toward acquiring a new building, since more offices and records would eventually have to move out of the current Court House because of dwindling space. The chief obstacle to getting a new building was convincing people to spend a large sum of money at one time rather than parceling it out over several years for repairs for the old building.<sup>46</sup>

In June, 1907, Platte County residents learned how insecure their legal records had been for the past two years. In 1905, two bank robbers had been caught in Monroe with two suspicious looking bottles. The sheriff had taken one bottle down to the river to determine whether it was nitroglycerin, and found that he was correct. For some reason, the second bottle had been placed under the staircase in the Court House and had sat there for two years--supposedly with the full knowledge of the Board of Supervisors, who paid five dollars for its removal in 1907.<sup>47</sup>

The removal of Judge Ratterman's offices had created enough space to last for a few years, but the aging Court House was still very vulnerable to fire.

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., August 17, 1906, p.1.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., June 29, 1907, p.1.

The issue again lay dormant until 1909 when a Lincoln businessman wrote a review in praise of Columbus. His only negative comment was that the town did not have a Court House that reflected its prosperity.<sup>48</sup> After reading the review, the Board of Supervisors became more interested in the project, and went so far as to find someone to draw up some plans. At the Board's January 11, 1910 meeting, the architect submitted a drawing for a forty-five thousand dollar addition to the existing structure. The Board claimed that it was merely considering the idea, and that the most it planned to do about the issue during its next few meetings was to decide whether to call a bond election.<sup>49</sup> The Board postponed the bond election for several years, and Columbus did not get a new Court House until 1921.

Columbus's growth and rural/urban shift was similar to the state averages. From 1900 to 1910, Nebraska's total population increased by 11.8 percent. Most of the growth took place in urban areas which had a 23 percent population increase, while the state's rural population increased only 8.3 percent in that time period. Platte County had an overall population increase of only seven percent, but its towns' populations increased at an average rate of twenty percent. Lindsay and Columbus reported substantial population increases, while Humphrey and Platte Center each had a slight population decrease. The county's rural population

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., April 16, 1909, p.1.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., January 14, 1910, p.1.

declined by 1.6 percent. In 1900, 23.7 percent of Nebraska's population was urban, and 76.3 percent rural, but by 1910, the urban total had risen to 26.1 percent, and the rural population had fallen to 73.9 percent.

Table of Columbus' Growth (figure 1.8)<sup>50</sup>

	1900	1910
<b>Total Population</b>	3,522	5,014
<b>Ward 1</b>	1,479	1,255
<b>Ward 2</b>	833	1,195
<b>Ward 3</b>	1,210	1,250
<b>Ward 4</b>	NA	1,314

Immigrants and their children accounted for a higher percentage of Columbus's population than they did in the national and state-wide statistics. Throughout the United States, those who were foreign-born or were the children of immigrants made up about a third of the population in 1900, compared to Nebraska where they composed forty-seven percent of the population, and to Columbus, where they made up sixty-five percent of the population in 1900.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>United States Bureau of the Census, *Twelfth Census; Population pt. 1*, p. 260, and *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910; vol. III, Population* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1912) p.34.

<sup>51</sup>*This Fabulous Century: Volume 1 1900-1910*, Ezra Bowen, ed (New York: Time-Life Books, 1969), p. 31, and Frederick C. Luebke, "Ethnic Group Settlement on the Great Plains," *Western Historical Quarterly* 8(4) (October 1977), pp. 405-406, and U.S. Bureau of the Census, Federal Manuscript Census for 1900 (University of Nebraska at Omaha) microfilm.

(Figure 1.9)

<u>Native and Foreign Born People in Columbus'</u> <u>Population</u>	<u>1900</u>	<u>% of Total</u> <u>Pop.</u>	<u>1910</u>	<u>% of Total</u> <u>Pop.</u>
<b>Native Born</b>	1230	34.92%	2043	40.75%
<b>Foreign Born</b>	823	23.37%	1061	21.16%
<b>Native Born with at least one foreign-born parent</b>	1469	41.71%	1910	38.09%
<b>Foreign Born and offspring born in the U.S.</b>	2292	65.08%	2971	59.25%

Most of Columbus's immigrant population during the first decade of the twentieth century were German-speaking people. Germans had settled heavily in Nebraska, and made up eighteen percent of the state's total population by 1900.<sup>52</sup> Germans from Germany made up six percent of Columbus' total population and twenty-eight percent of the immigrant population in 1900. After including Austrians, Swiss, Prussians, and Germans from Russia, German immigrants composed eleven percent of Columbus's total population and fifty-three percent of its immigrant population by 1900.<sup>53</sup>

Polish-speaking people made up the second most significant portion of Columbus' immigrant population. They made up 4.29 percent of the total population in 1900 and 4.4 percent in 1910. In both enumerations, they represented twenty percent of the immigrant population.<sup>54</sup> The most significant number of Polish-speaking immigrants reported the Austrian-controlled portion of

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<sup>52</sup>Luebke, "Ethnic Group Settlement on the Great Plains," p. 411 - 412.

<sup>53</sup>U.S. Bureau of the Census, Federal Manuscript Census for 1910 (NSHS) microfilm.

<sup>54</sup>U.S. Bureau of the Census, Federal Manuscript Census for 1900 (University of Nebraska at Omaha) and Federal Manuscript Census for 1910 (NSHS).



Poland as their place of origin.<sup>55</sup>

Acquiring more residents meant that Columbus had to physically expand. Several new additions to the town were platted in the 1900 to 1910 decade including Evans addition (1901), Phillips' second addition (1907), and Hockenberger's addition (1908). In 1906, the City Council passed an ordinance to extend the city limits to the north to include one half of the area of Pearsall's addition.<sup>56</sup> (See Figure 1.10, p. 39)

Changes in employment patterns between 1900 and 1910 reflect Columbus' transition from a frontier settlement to a mature midwestern town. The most common occupation reported on the 1900 Federal Census was "day laborer"-- people whose main source of income was from doing odd jobs around town. Ten years later, only a small portion of the work force relied on odd jobs to earn a living. On the 1910 Federal Census, most men still classified themselves as "laborers," but listed a specific place of employment. A decade of prosperity meant that more people could afford at least one house servant. In 1910, these positions were most often filled by young women, age sixteen or younger, who were either immigrants or had at least one foreign-born parent. Native-born women usually opted to become store clerks, teachers, or dressmakers.

As Columbus grew, so did the demand for goods and services. The

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>*Telegram*, October 26, 1906, p.1.

number of merchants and the clerks they employed increased dramatically from 1900 to 1910.

An expanding infrastructure and introduction of new technology created many employment opportunities. In 1900, only four people listed themselves as telephone operators. In 1910, forty-three people reported that they were employed by one of the town's two telephone companies. The arrival of the automobile created new positions and transformed old ones. Street pavers were beginning to replace street sprinklers, repair garage owners were listed for the first time, and some machinists listed the repair garages rather than the railroad companies as their employers.

**Dynamics of Columbus' most common occupations: 1900-1910 (figure 1.11)<sup>57</sup>**

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Number of People in Occupation: 1900</u>	<u>Percentage of Workforce: 1900</u>	<u>Number of People in Occupation: 1910</u>	<u>Percentage of Workforce: 1910</u>
	<b><u>Total: 1,223</u></b>		<b><u>Total: 2,731</u></b>	
Day Laborer	192	15.70%	80	2.93%
Merchant	57	4.66%	162	5.93%
Railroad	108	8.83%	286*	10.47%*
Salesclerk	79	6.46%	198	7.25%
Servant	91	7.44%	136	4.98%
Telephone Companies	4	.33%	43	1.57%

\*These figures do not include a group of 33 Greek railroad construction workers who were completing a project during the 1910 enumeration.

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<sup>57</sup>Federal Manuscript Census, 1900 and 1910, (NSHS).

When an outside contractor started a large project, such as building the new electric light plant, he usually agreed in his contract to use as much local labor as possible rather than bringing all workers in from his place of origin. However, by 1905, most of Columbus's laborers had found regular employment, and contractors usually had to bring in a significant percentage of their crew, or advertise for more workers in the area newspapers.

The high demand for workers created a situation in which employees could force their employers to shorten their working hours and make other improvements to working conditions. As in the rest of the nation, Columbus workers began forming labor unions to collectively appeal to their employers for improved working conditions.

As early as 1900, Columbus's clerks began appealing to their employers to shorten their working day to ten hours. In 1901, most of the merchants in town agreed that they would close at seven o'clock on week-nights, beginning April 15.<sup>58</sup> This early attempt at collective bargaining was ultimately unsuccessful, because not all of the merchants agreed to the shorter day, and those that had reduced their hours of operation soon returned to their former schedules to avoid losing business.

In 1902, the local threshers organized to try to push grain prices up, and to keep them high. A rumor spread through the Columbus area that the

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<sup>58</sup>*Telegram*, April 5, 1901, p.1.

organization would resort to violence to dissuade other threshers from working below union wages.<sup>59</sup>

On June 30, 1902, union headquarters ordered John Umland, a machinist for the Union Pacific Railroad Company, to walk off the job because U.P. insisted upon paying machinists by the piece-work method rather than hourly, as the union had demanded. Since a machinist often worked an entire day trying to fix one faulty piece of equipment, the piece-work payment method tended to depress their wages, and the union claimed that U.P.'s rates were too low anyway. Umland's non-union assistant walked off the job, allegedly voluntarily, in support of the union machinists' strike.<sup>60</sup>

In March 1903, local journeyman carpenters began organizing a union.<sup>61</sup> A month later, carpenters and brick-layers who had been working on the new "Gray building" threatened to strike if their union's (unspecified) conditions were not met. They were on a temporary lay-off due to poor weather and to wait for a delayed shipment of material. People had assumed that because work had stopped, the workers had already gone on strike. Local leaders of both unions assured everyone concerned that the current situation was temporary, and work would resume as soon as the shipment arrived and the weather improved enough

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., March 21, 1902, p.1.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., July 4, 1902, p.1.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., March 6, 1903, p.1.

for work to begin. However, they warned that conditions still favored a strike if the contractor did not meet with both unions' demands before the June deadline.<sup>62</sup>

Within days of the union leaders' assurances that the current situation was a temporary lay-off, the carpenters declared a strike, and the brick-layers held a sympathetic strike, apparently because the contractor had granted the brick-layers' union's demands, but not the carpenters' unions' demands. Both sides claimed that the dispute would probably be solved quickly, due to the mediation of the brick-layers. The major points of contention were getting the contractor to recognize the local carpenters' union and allowing his regular carpenters to join it.<sup>63</sup>

Having failed to secure a ten-hour day, the clerks made another attempt at shortening their workday as the carpenters and brick-layers held their strike. They had circulated a petition requesting a twelve-hour day, from eight a.m. to eight p.m, every day except Saturdays. When they had enough signatures, they presented it to their employers. Most merchants agreed to the request, and announced that the new business hours would go into effect on April 15.<sup>64</sup>

The *Telegram* often ran editorials claiming how well ethnically and culturally diverse people got along in the Columbus area; however, a few

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., April 3, 1903, p.1.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., April 10, 1903, p.1.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., April 3, 1903, p.5.

interracial incidents suggest that the situation was not as harmonious as the newspaper tried to make people to believe. The most blatant episode occurred in early 1904, and caused a kitchen-staff strike at the Home Restaurant. Ernest Mitchell, a cook at the restaurant, claimed that a new waitress had refused to serve his wife because she was “colored.” The management refused to dismiss or discipline the woman, so Mitchell staged a walk-out which involved several employees. The restaurant’s owners claimed that they had not heard about the incident before the walk-out and fired Mitchell. They said that the waitress Mitchell had accused of mistreating his wife could continue working at the restaurant.<sup>65</sup>

Columbus teamsters held a strike in 1907, soon after they heard that local coal dealers planned to reduce the price of coal delivery from fifty cents to twenty-five cents during the spring and summer months. They claimed that reduction of delivery costs would reduce their wages below subsistence level. The dealers wanted to reduce the rates because the loads were lighter, and Columbus teamsters did not have to haul coal as far as their big-city counterparts did.<sup>66</sup>

The teamsters claimed that the reduced fee was not enough support them. They got half of the delivery fee for shoveling coal into their wagons,

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., February 5, 1904, p.1.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., March 29, 1907, p.1.

transporting it to the customer, and then shoveling it into customers' cellars. They claimed that they could barely make a living from the usual rates, let alone from reduced charges. They demanded that the coal dealers maintain their fifty cent delivery charge throughout the year and that the teamsters should get eighty percent (forty cents) rather than fifty percent of the fee.<sup>67</sup> After two weeks of negotiations, the coal dealers agreed to the teamsters' demands.<sup>68</sup>

In August of the same year, a widespread telegraphers' strike delayed message traffic in Columbus because many of the local telegraphers were supporting the strike. The operators were asking for a fifteen percent pay increase and an eight-hour workday.<sup>69</sup>

After seeing the results other workers had achieved through strikes, four workers at the Lund Planing Mill held their own strike and demanded a fifty-cent raise. The four strikers did not talk to the *Telegram*, but the mill owner believed that the workers had gone on strike because he had just been awarded a contract for planing wood for the new YMCA building, and they probably thought that he would be desperate enough for laborers that he would agree to the raised wages. The owner calculated his bid for the contract using his current wage rates, and claimed he would suffer a loss on the project if he raised wages. Rather than

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., April 5, 1907, p.1.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., April 12, 1907, p.5.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., August 16, 1907, p.1.

giving in to the strikers' demands, he was compensating for his labor shortage by taking on fewer additional jobs than he had originally planned until they returned to work or he replaced them.<sup>70</sup>

To avoid flooding eastern cities with unemployed European immigrants, the Department of Commerce and Labor headquarters in Washington, D.C. began contacting commercial clubs and chambers of commerce throughout the nation, and requesting lists of the types and amounts of skilled and unskilled labor that their communities might need. Columbus's Commercial Club received a letter in December, 1907, and responded that the town did not need any type of labor because it had experienced a wave of immigration, primarily from Europe, the previous summer which had filled the few labor shortages (unskilled labor and house servants) that had existed.<sup>71</sup>

By 1909, clerks had become one of the largest classes of workers in Columbus, and they began to form a local organization to maximize their negotiating power. In April, fifty-two of the clerks founded the Columbus Clerks' League. Their first mission was to convince their employers to close at six o'clock every weekday evening, creating a nine-hour workday, and to close all day for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day. Drug stores, newsstands, and confections stores were to be exempt from the nine-hour day requirement. In

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., September 27, 1907, p.5.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., December 13, 1907, p.1.



exchange for these concessions, the clerks planned to stay after closing to clean and restock. They did not plan to affiliate with any state or national organizations.<sup>72</sup>

A week after the League's formation and presentation of requests to the town's merchants, a representative of the State Labor Commission came to Columbus to talk to members about their petition. He advised them to continue on their strategy of asking for a shorter workday rather than demanding it, and offering something in exchange. By the end of his visit, all but two of the town's merchants had agreed to the clerks' proposal, and the last two were rumored to be about to sign the agreement.<sup>73</sup>

Less than a month after its creation, the Columbus Clerks' League received the concessions it had requested. All the merchants had agreed to the nine-hour workday and to the holiday closings in exchange for cleaning and restocking. The League also agreed to work longer the day before Thanksgiving and New Year's Day, and for a week before Christmas. The new policy was to go into effect on April 26, 1909.<sup>74</sup> After hearing about the League's success, clerks in Leigh convinced their employers to begin closing earlier, apparently following a

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid., April 2, 1909, p.1.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., April 9, 1909, p.1.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., April 16, 1909, p.5.

state-wide trend.<sup>75</sup> The idea of a shorter work-week also became popular. Many Columbus businesses began closing on Sundays beginning October 3.<sup>76</sup>

Local blacksmiths formed a chapter of the State Association of Blacksmiths and Wheelwrights. The society had been formed to establish a uniform price scale and to protect members from bad accounts. It had begun lobbying for laws that would allow blacksmiths to file something similar to a mechanics' lien, and to require horse-shoers to have basic knowledge of horse anatomy.<sup>77</sup>

The most common type of labor dispute did not involve strikes or formations of unions. Most employers had a few workers who tried to shave as much time off their day as possible and still draw full pay by starting the workday and returning from lunch according to the slowest watch and leaving for lunch and ending the day by the fastest watch. To end these petty disputes, the electric company set up an industrial whistle that sounded at seven a.m., noon, one-thirty p.m., and at six p.m. to signal the beginning and ending of shifts.<sup>78</sup>

Encouraged by the decade of prosperity, growth, and progress, Dr. E.H. Naumann speculated on Columbus' future at the 1909 YMCA Business Club banquet. He projected that in 1931, forty years after his arrival, Columbus would

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., June 11, 1909, p.1.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., October 1, 1909, p.1.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., December 3, 1909, p.1.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., November 25, 1910, p.5.

be a city of twenty-five thousand people with highly developed schools, a YMCA, a power canal--and "dry."<sup>79</sup> Columbus would fall short of Dr. Naumann's dreams. Although it would have adequate schools and a YMCA, its 1930 population would be only 6,898,<sup>80</sup> and the power canal project would not begin for another three years. It was, however, officially "dry" just like the rest of the nation.

Nearly ninety years later, in 1998, Columbus had not entirely lived up to Naumann's expectations. Its schools were comparable to those of the rest of the nation, while the power canal was fully operational and supplied power to Columbus and several other communities, although not as many as the original project supporters had hoped. The YMCA had an active membership, but it was chiefly for recreational use, rather than a Christian dormitory for young men. The 1990 census showed that Columbus had a population of slightly less than twenty thousand, although informal enumerations put the total around twenty-three thousand, and its liquor trade was thriving.<sup>81</sup>

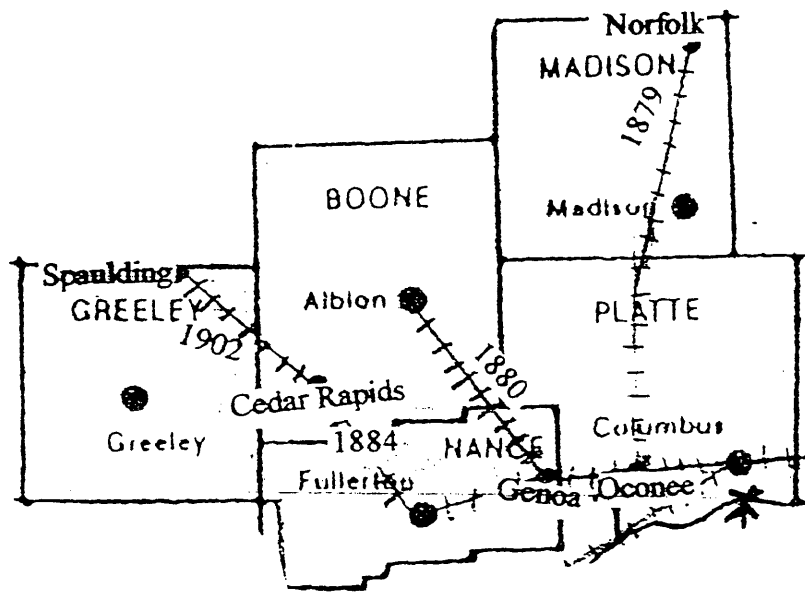
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<sup>79</sup>Ibid., September 24, 1909, p.1.

<sup>80</sup>United States Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census of the United States: Vol. III Population, part 2* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1931) p. 96.

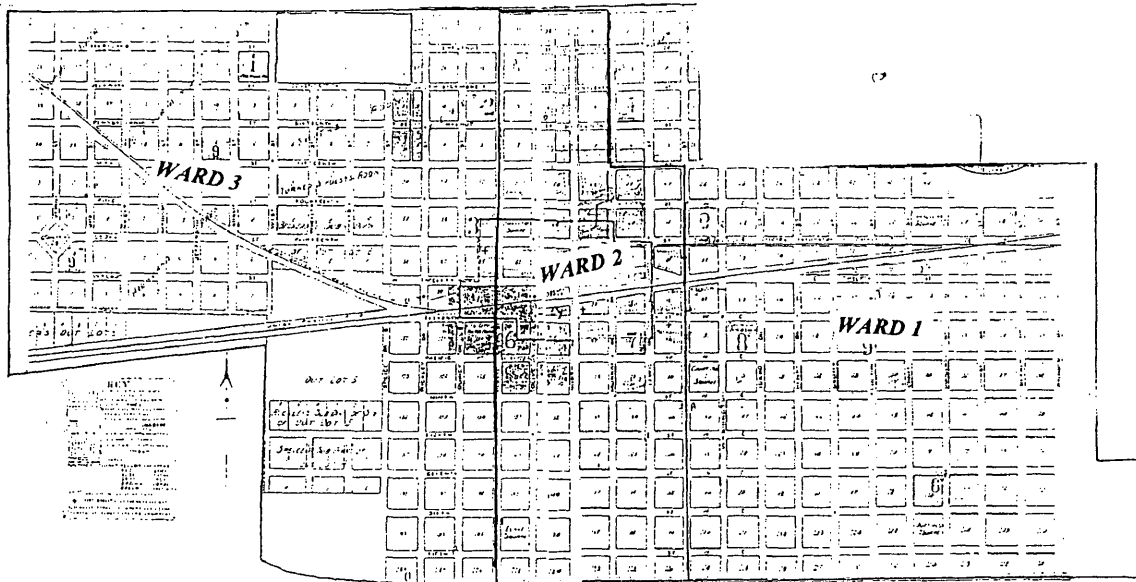
<sup>81</sup>United States Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population and Housing: Population and Housing Characteristics for Congressional Districts of the 103<sup>rd</sup> Congress - Nebraska* (Washington: GPO, 1992), p.8.

Branches of the Union Pacific Mainline Near Columbus, Nebraska (Figure 1.1)<sup>82</sup>

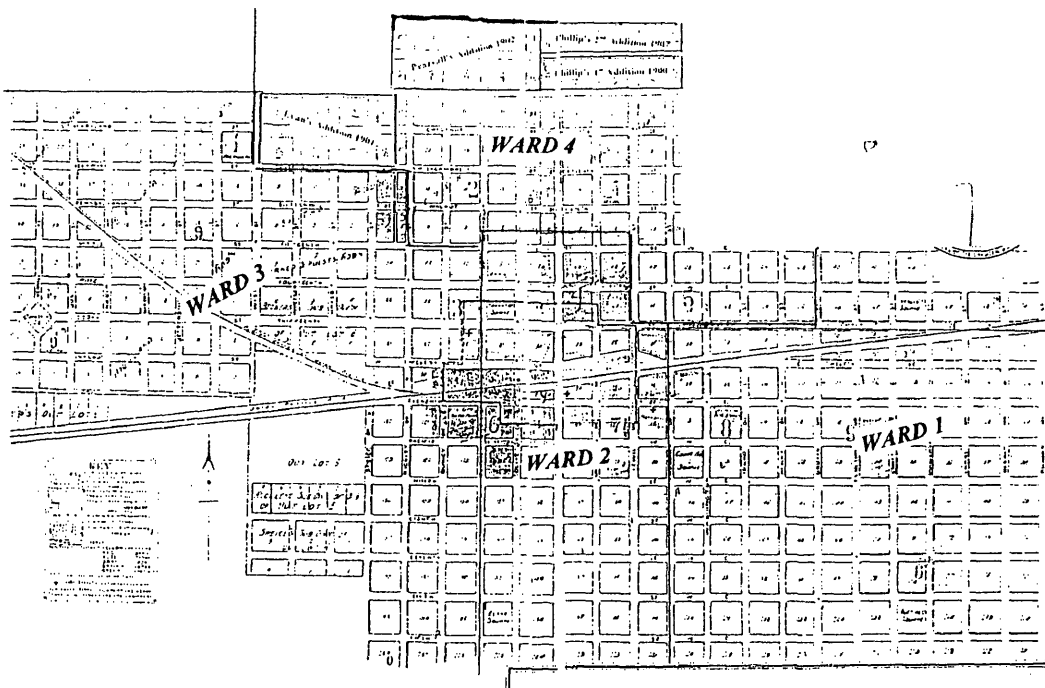


<sup>82</sup>Rand McNally *Handy Railroad Atlas of the United States*, (Chicago, New York, San Francisco: Rand McNally & Company, 1985), p. 30.

Map of Columbus City Voting Wards, c 1900 (Figure 1.2)<sup>83</sup>



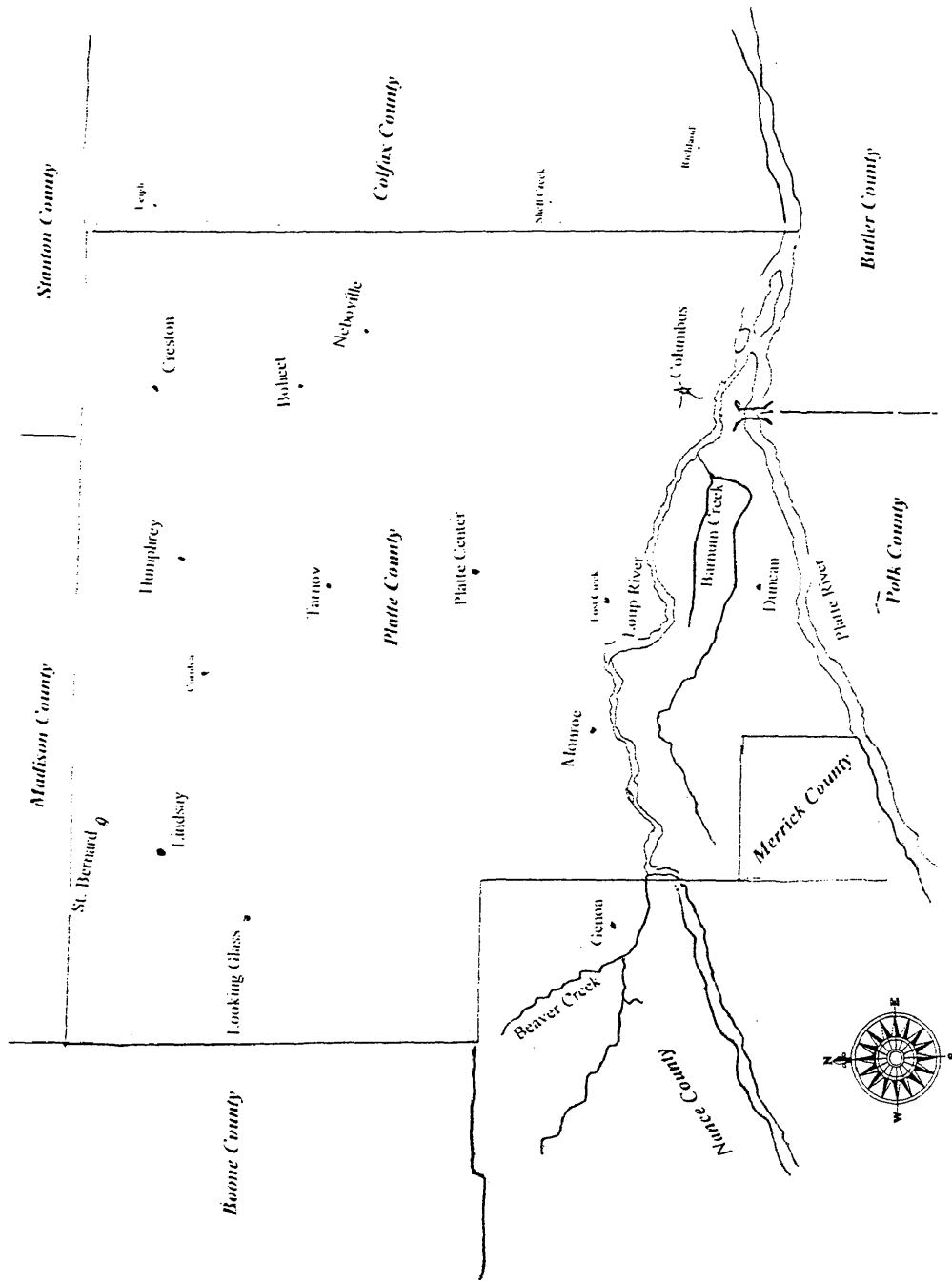
Map of Columbus City Voting Wards, c 1908 (Figure 1.2)<sup>84</sup>



<sup>83</sup>The Official State Atlas of Nebraska (Philadelphia: Evans & Kirk, 1885), pp. 98-99.

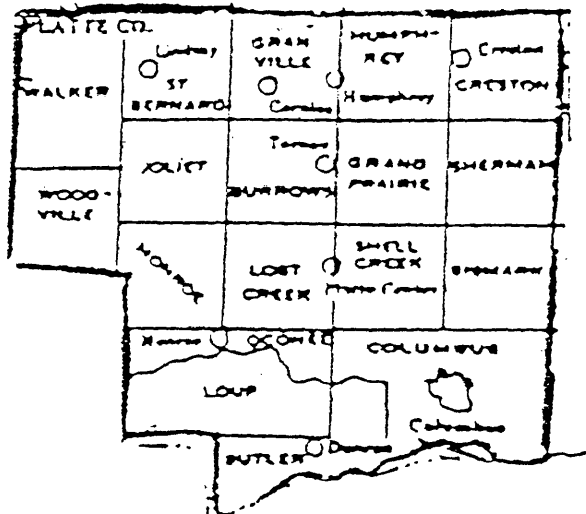
<sup>84</sup>Sanborn Map Company, Columbus, Platte County, Nebraska (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1909)..

Platte County and Surrounding Area (Figure 1.4)<sup>85</sup>



<sup>85</sup>The Official State Atlas of Nebraska, p.97.

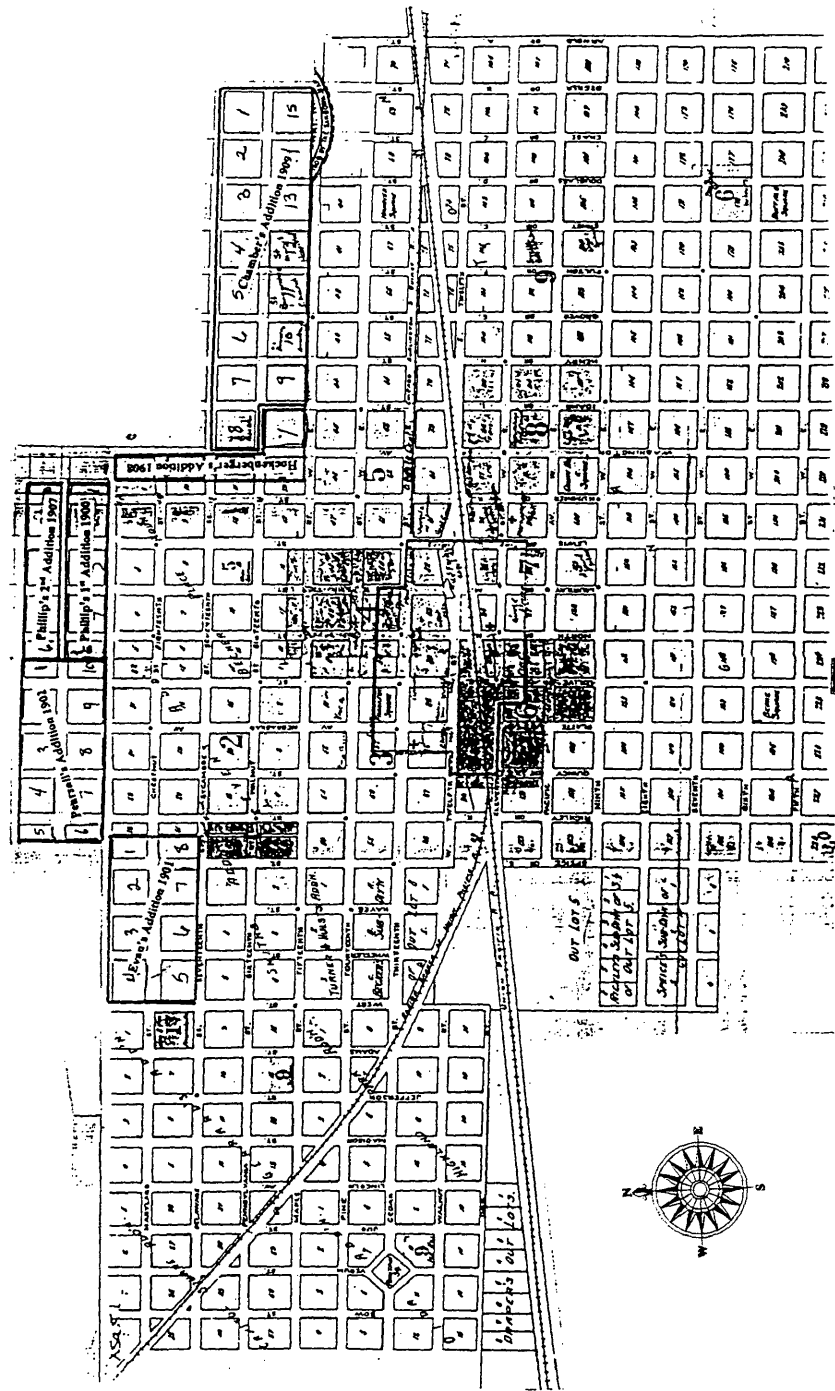
Platte County Townships (Figure 1.5)<sup>86</sup>



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<sup>86</sup>John L. Andriot, ed., *Township Atlas of the United States* (McLean, Virginia: Andriot Associates, 1979), pp. 390-391.

Additions to Columbus, 1900-1910 (Figure 1.10)<sup>87</sup>



<sup>87</sup>Sanborn Map Company, *Columbus*, and Plat Book 1, Platte County Register of Deeds Office, pp. 20, 22, 24, and 80.



# The Columbus Power Canal

## Chapter 2

One issue that most Columbus residents agreed upon was the need for a reliable source of inexpensive power. Since the 1870s, people had been suggesting that the Loup River could provide irrigation water for all area farmers who wanted it, and later began speculating whether it could supply electrical power not only for the Columbus area, but as far away as Omaha and Lincoln. The project's most avid promoter, H.E. Babcock, had started a law practice in Ord, Nebraska in 1886, but left the legal profession about 1895 to begin promoting irrigation projects.<sup>1</sup> Despite his best efforts, the project had not come to fruition by the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, and the end result in the 1930s would be quite different from what he had envisioned.

Before 1900, three attempts to make the canal a reality failed. The first attempt in 1874 was sponsored by the local chapter of the National Grange. Failure of the project was attributed mostly to the destruction of crops by grasshoppers which made private funding of the project impossible.<sup>2</sup> In the 1880s, two local men surveyed the area comprising the favored route for the

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<sup>1</sup>*Columbus Weekly Telegram*, December 21, 1971, p.12.

<sup>2</sup>Robert E. Firth, *Public Power in Nebraska: A Report on State Ownership* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962) p. 14.

canal system. Encouraged by their favorable results, local investors organized the Columbus Canal and Power Company in 1893. A year later, they reorganized the company, renaming it the Columbus Power and Irrigation Company. The organization drew up plans for a power house and a reservoir, but never followed through with any financing or construction.<sup>3</sup>

H.E. Babcock became involved with the project in 1896, during the third attempt. He tried to salvage the project by organizing a corporation, the Nebraska Central Irrigation Company (NCI), to handle finances. The new company's ultimate goal was to dig an irrigation canal from the Loup river through Platte and Colfax counties, and end near Schuyler.<sup>4</sup> It soon began construction on the first phase of the project--a series of ditches on Beaver Creek, west of Genoa, which was supposed to connect the creek to the Loup river. Once they connected those bodies of water, the company's goal was to continue the canal system from Nance County through Platte and Colfax counties and into Dodge County. They only managed to construct ditches through part of Nance County, digging as far as Lost Creek before interest in financing the project waned due to the abundant precipitation between 1900 and 1902.<sup>5</sup> (See Figure 1.4, p. 37)

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., *Public Power in Nebraska* p. 14 - 15.

<sup>4</sup>Margaret Curry, *The History of Platte County, Nebraska*, Culver City, CA: Murray and Gek, 1950, p. 394.

<sup>5</sup>Firth, *Public Power in Nebraska* p.15.

Favorable weather may have caused the general public to forget about the canal project, but H.E. Babcock never did. He spent the remainder of his life keeping the project alive in the minds of Columbus and Platte County residents as well as in the minds of financiers on the East Coast and in Europe. Luckily for Babcock, in 1901 the project had already caught the interest of Edgar Howard, editor of the Columbus *Telegram*. Throughout the next decade, Howard used the *Telegram* to promote the canal project by insisting that the canal would swell the population of the community by bringing in new industries eager to exploit the “limitless” supply of power. Throughout the project’s many setbacks, Howard kept reassuring the community that the canal project would happen “soon,” and promoted heavy investment in the project to prove to the financiers that the people of Columbus wanted a power canal.

Howard’s first editorial about the canal was a brilliant appeal to the town’s collective sense of boosterism. He briefly mentioned that the proposed canal system would be located just north of the town, and then went into great detail about the possible commercial and recreational uses of the accompanying reservoir. At the end of his description he set a challenge for the boosters: Minneapolis had grown to a city of great size by exploiting water resources that were supposedly no more extensive than what was available to Columbus. Therefore, would not development of Columbus’ water resources have a similar effect on the local

population?<sup>6</sup>

A week later, the *Telegram* ran two articles about dignitaries' visits to the canal site. The first reported the mayor's visit to the headgates of the existing irrigation ditches on Wednesday, August 7, 1901. He and some city council members had gone to the site to examine the possibility of connecting the ditches to the Loup river. Upon their return, they pronounced the project "entirely feasible."<sup>7</sup> The second article informed readers that businessmen from New York and Fremont had made an unpublicized visit to Columbus to look over the details of the data on the Loup river. The editor's opinion was that the firms these men represented must have been serious about the project or they would not have sent people to Columbus.<sup>8</sup>

Two weeks later, the *Telegram* announced that the estimated cost of the project was \$250,000. Readers were urged to invest a few thousand dollars in the project and to encourage others to do the same so that the project would have a strong financial base in the community. The article assured would-be investors that they would see excellent returns on their money because with cheap power readily available many factories and businesses would begin to locate in

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<sup>6</sup>*Telegram*, August 2, 1901, p.1.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, August 9, 1901, p.1.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, August 9, 1901, p.1.

Columbus.<sup>9</sup> After a meeting at the real estate offices of Becher, Hockenburger & Chambers, the eastern financiers determined that Columbus investors would only need to raise seven thousand dollars toward the canal project, but were welcome to raise more money if they so desired. The *Telegram* speculated that most local businessmen would be investing in the project.<sup>10</sup>

By the beginning of November 1901, local investments had allowed NCI to pay off its debts and begin work on the canals connecting the Beaver Creek ditches to the Loup River.<sup>11</sup> At the beginning of 1902, the Columbus Commercial Club stepped in and met with Fritz Jaeggi, a Swiss engineer who was in town visiting relatives. The Club informed Columbus investors that they would need to raise at least four thousand dollars to get the project started. By the time that week's edition was published, \$1,250 had already been raised, and the Commercial Club had formed a committee to canvas for the rest of the money.<sup>12</sup> Jaeggi returned to Switzerland at the beginning of February 1902, promising to stop in Omaha, Washington D.C., New York, and Boston to make sure that financial and unspecified "other" arrangements were progressing. The

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., August 23, 1901, p.1.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., September 6, 1901, p.1.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., September 27, 1901, p.1

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., January 17, 1902, p.5.

*Telegram* again assured its readers that the prospects for the canal looked good.<sup>13</sup>

Babcock continued to send Loup River water-flow reports to his East Coast investors. By the end of April 1902, they had determined that the Loup had enough water power to supply water and energy during times when the area got at least its normal amount of rainfall. The NCI did not have data on the Loup's water-flow for times of inadequate rainfall, so the investors insisted upon including a large reservoir in the initial project plans as an alternative source of power for times of inadequate rainfall. Surveyors found a natural pocket of land about three miles north of town. It was two and a half miles long; it varied between one and two miles in width, and ranged from one to thirty feet in depth. Engineers estimated it could hold eighty-seven million gallons of water per foot of depth. The *Telegram* renewed its efforts to promote the proposed reservoir as a recreational attraction as well as a source of power.<sup>14</sup> During the summer of 1902, the would-be eastern investors continued to vaguely express their interest in the canal project. In September of that year, the presence of representatives from firms in Omaha and New York renewed hope that construction of the canal would soon begin, even though no one on the *Telegram* staff could find out exactly why the representatives were in town.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., February 7, 1902, p.1.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., April 25, 1902, p.4.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., September 12, 1902, p.1.

A week after the anonymous representatives visited Columbus, people learned about the first major setback the project was to experience: the NCI's claim to water rights on the Loup River had been disputed.<sup>16</sup> Throughout the remainder of 1902, Babcock made frequent trips to the East Coast to keep potential investors interested in the project while the company resolved the water rights dispute. When he returned from one of these trips in mid-December, he was not optimistic about the current group of investors financing the project. They had not definitively said they would not support the project, but they were cautiously sifting through every detail and questioning every bit of data on the project before saying yes. The group was financing similar projects in other regions, and was considering taking on others besides the Columbus project. Despite Babcock's reservations, the *Telegram* reassured its readers that the investors would surely see fit to finance such a worthwhile project.<sup>17</sup>

On January 2, 1903, Babcock left for New York on the first of many meetings that he and the *Telegram* would define as "the decisive one" for the future of the canal project.<sup>18</sup> He returned to Columbus at the end of February with a decisive "maybe" from the investment group.<sup>19</sup> By the beginning of April,

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., September 19, 1902, p.1.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., December 12, 1902, p.1.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., January 2, 1903, p.1.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., February 27, 1903, p.5.

he was back in New York for further discussions on the project. Two Swiss engineers, Fritz Jaeggi and Dr. S.A. Kaiser, joined him for this round of negotiations,<sup>20</sup> but the investors still refused to give a definite answer.

To strengthen their pitch to the East Coast investors, Babcock and other project supporters began taking action within Nebraska. A local judge went to Lincoln at the end of February 1903 to lobby for the passage of two or three bills that had been introduced which promised to smooth the way for the canal.<sup>21</sup> Canal project boosters brought an electrical engineer from New York in May, 1903 to assess the power use of eastern Nebraska. The data would be used to determine how critical a new canal system and power plant were to the area.<sup>22</sup> In June 1903, Babcock filed an application for water rights on the Loup River on behalf of the NCI before the State Board of Irrigation in Lincoln. He applied for twenty-seven feet per second to provide one hundred thousand horsepower daily. His application was the largest request for water rights to come before the board to that date. Upon his return, Babcock granted the *Telegram* an interview, during which he claimed that he was more hopeful than ever for the canal's future. The financiers were interested and the project plans had grown to a

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., April 3, 1903, p.5.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., February 27, 1903, p.1.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., May 15, 1903, p.1.



larger proportion than ever before.<sup>23</sup>

The *Telegram* had become a whole-hearted booster of the canal project, but while it was busy promoting the project, newspapers from other towns were just as busy predicting doom for the canal or promoting similar projects in their own towns. In April 1903, the *Telegram* reprinted an article from the Monroe *Looking Glass* which implied that the Columbus power canal was not likely to happen, and bluntly stated that if it did become a reality, all financial benefit would go to the Eastern syndicates who financed it. The author believed that incidental limited local benefits might show up in the form of increased food supply, power for utilities, and transportation.<sup>24</sup>

Shortly after Babcock filed for Loup River water rights, he was called to New York. Fremont, Nebraska had presented plans for a canal system to the same group of investors. Competition between the two towns promised to be fierce, especially since promoters of an electric railway company had expressed interest in setting up an extensive system in eastern Nebraska which would cause a drastic increase in the electrical power requirement of the region. Babcock thought that only one of the projects would be approved at the conclusion of this meeting, and was confident that it would be Columbus's because their plan had

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., June 12, 1903, p.1.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., April 24, 1903, p.5.

“unmistakable advantages.”<sup>25</sup> A month later, he returned to Columbus without a definite answer. The investors were delaying their decision until Fremont made a more complete survey of their proposed site.<sup>26</sup>

The *Telegram* and some Omaha newspapers began printing articles in which someone claiming to have reliable, inside information would “confirm” that the investment group was currently favoring one of the towns’ plans over the other’s. Even before Fremont had finished surveying its proposed canal route, a cashier at an Omaha branch of the First National Bank claimed that he was close to people who had influence over the decision and they were saying that Columbus was the favored site.<sup>27</sup> However, an article appearing in the Omaha papers in September 1903 claimed that a deal had already been struck, and a syndicate formed to finance the Fremont project. Babcock advised people to ignore the article, saying that a decision could not be made until after a critical meeting with engineers representing both projects. That meeting had not yet happened, because the engineers were still at the sites.<sup>28</sup>

A week later, the Fremont representatives had finished their surveys and plans. Babcock went to New York while the investment company carried out an

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., June 19, 1903, p.1.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., July 17, 1903, p.5.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., July 17, 1903, p.5.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., September 18, 1903, p.1.

in-depth study of both plans.<sup>29</sup> At the end of November, the only change in the situation was the replacement of the investment firm member who had been representing Columbus. Since the head of the firm was now looking out for Columbus' interests, the *Telegram* reported this change as an encouraging event.<sup>30</sup> The investors made their decision in mid-December 1903. Much to the disappointment of Columbus boosters, the New York firm decided to back the Fremont project because it was closer to Omaha. The Columbus plans were reported to require nearly double the volume of power at a greater cost for transmission of electric current to Omaha. Completely disregarding the economic reason given for preference of the Fremont project, the *Telegram* article ended with a scathing editorial comment blaming the wealthy men of Columbus for the project's failure. If they had given Babcock more financial support, the paper accused, the investors would have chosen to finance the Columbus project.<sup>31</sup> Several months later, the *Telegram* indulged in some malicious glee. The Fremont newspapers were reporting that the investment firm had withdrawn its offer of financial support and the project promoters had not yet found an alternative source of funding.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., November 13, 1903, p.1.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., November 27, 1903, p.1.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., December 18, 1903, p.1.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., March 24, 1905, p.1.

Unwilling to let the loss of one firm's backing permanently derail the Columbus power canal, Babcock returned to New York in late February 1904 to look for someone else to finance the project.<sup>33</sup> Progress on the canal project for the next year consisted mostly of Babcock traveling to the East Coast, Chicago, and Omaha trying to find financial backing, and engineers from several investment firms coming to Columbus to look over the site, find it promising, but demand more statistics and measurements of the site and water-flow before committing to the project, then leave the area, never to be heard from again. The NCI began repairs on its existing ditches in April 1904. Maintenance had been neglected during the prolonged negotiations in New York. The *Telegram* once again reassured the people of Columbus that the canal issue was not dead, and the ditch repairs should not be taken as a sign that it was.<sup>34</sup>

Early in 1905, *Telegram* readers began complaining about the lack of news about the canal project. The newspaper staff claimed that they kept up with the latest developments of the project, but those most closely involved in the negotiations had requested that most of the information be kept confidential, and the small amount of information that was available for publication was very speculative. The *Telegram* claimed that it would not publish rumors, but to satisfy its readers' desire for information, it reprinted two articles that had run in

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., February 26, 1904, p.1.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., April 1, 1904, p.1.

the *Lincoln Journal* and the *Omaha Bee* with a disclaimer for the accuracy of the information contained. The articles claimed that the Columbus power canal and power plant would happen very soon and when completed would supply Omaha and Lincoln with inexpensive power. They also mentioned the possibility of extending the works to Schuyler which would double the Columbus plant's capacity.<sup>35</sup>

Two other rumors in 1905 elevated residents' hopes that the canal project would soon become a reality. In July a rumor circulated that a representative of the sugar beet industry had promised financial backing and that work would begin as soon as construction material arrived. However, Babcock was still in the East negotiating, and only his closest associates knew how the deal was progressing.<sup>36</sup> In November, the *Omaha News* reported that it had on "good authority" information confirming that the Columbus power canal project had been financed for five and a half million dollars. After so many disappointments, Columbus people were bound to be skeptical, so before running the reprint, *Telegram* staff tracked down the story's source. They found that the "good authority" was a rumor started in Fremont. The newspaper advised its readers to wait until Babcock made his next report before they got too excited.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., February 24, 1905, p.8.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., July 14, 1905, p.1.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., November 24, 1905, p.1.

At the end of 1906, the *Omaha News* launched yet another rumor regarding the power canal. It reported that construction would begin in the spring and some of the minor contracts had already been awarded. Babcock's closest associates in town had not heard anything from him, and they thought it highly unlikely that an electrical company would close a deal so close to the end of the year.<sup>38</sup>

NCI still struggled with water rights issues. On February 9, 1906, Babcock called a company meeting to discuss problems that had arisen regarding compliance with the technicalities following sale of stock. He would not give any more information about the negotiations before he returned to New York.<sup>39</sup> For another year, the only results of Babcock's negotiations were visits from business representatives and engineers. Another round of negotiations in the East that seemed assured of success fell through due to a money panic in 1907. Babcock promised to renew the negotiations once the crisis had passed.<sup>40</sup>

While he was waiting to renew the negotiations with eastern financiers, Babcock tried to raise more interest for the project among the businesses and wealthy individuals of Omaha. The *Telegram* optimistically predicted that he would eventually succeed in spite of the alleged opposition of the Omaha Electric

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., December 28, 1906, p.1.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., February 9, 1906, p.1.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., April 5, 1907, p.1.

Light Company, which was rumored to be doing everything in its power to prevent dissemination of information that suggested that Omaha could receive most of its electric power from Columbus's proposed power canal.<sup>41</sup>

Newspapers from other towns sent urgent letters of inquiry and phoned the *Telegram* office inquiring about a group of engineers which had been surveying around the area that was currently favored for the canal route and reservoir site. The *Telegram* reported to its readers and the other newspapers that it did not know who sent the engineers, and even if it had, it would not have divulged the information without Babcock's consent. The staff took the interest of the other newspapers as a sign that the canal would happen very soon.<sup>42</sup> This was enough to prompt the *Telegram* to ask its readers, "How soon after the arrival of the power canal would Columbus have a population of 10,000?"<sup>43</sup>

Omaha's Commercial Club promised support for the canal project at the end of 1907, when the financial panic was calming down. The *Omaha Bee* ran an article with Babcock's thanks for the city's support of the project and his promise that it would move forward quickly since the financial panic was ending. He claimed that water power and electricity would do more for Nebraska than

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., November 15, 1907, p.1.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p.5.

cheap coal and gas had done for Pennsylvania and Ohio.<sup>44</sup> By the end of March 1908, Omaha was planning to put five million dollars worth of bonds toward a water power plant which the *Telegram* assumed would have to be in Columbus, since the Loup was reputed to be the only river in Nebraska that had enough water to support a power canal.<sup>45</sup> Leopold Jaeggi, brother of Fritz Jaeggi, a member of NCI and active promoter of the project, asked the Columbus Commercial Club to help organize a local stock company to begin raising capital for the power canal.<sup>46</sup>

The end of the financial crisis did not do much to speed up the process of finding reliable financial backing for the canal project. Babcock and Fritz Jaeggi returned from Omaha in late May, 1908 without having made any progress on the project except for the preliminary setup of a power company.<sup>47</sup> Then, four months later, on Saturday, September 27, 1908, the Nebraska Power Company was incorporated in Delaware.<sup>48</sup>

November, 1908 began with a flurry of notices in Omaha newspapers stating that work on the canal would begin very soon--rumors which received

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., December 13, 1907, p.1.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., March 27, 1908, p.1.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., April 17, 1908, p.1.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., May 22, 1908, p.1.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., October 2, 1908, p.1.



some credence when Babcock and Jaeggi returned to Columbus with an engineer from New York City. People were assured that something big was happening with the project and that more news would be released around the first of the year.<sup>49</sup> The Columbus Commercial Club announced a mass meeting for Saturday, January 16, 1909, with the entire agenda devoted to discussion of new developments in the power canal project. South Omaha investors had come to an understanding with Swiss interests, and had a bill pledging financial support for the canal project in front of its City Council for a final reading. If the measure passed the final reading, the council would call a special election so the voters of South Omaha could decide whether to support the project.<sup>50</sup>

A week later, the issue of financial support was far from the only obstacle facing the project. H.E. Babcock and Fritz Jaeggi had been working with different priorities and objectives as they attempted to find financial support for the power canal. Jaeggi had been primarily responsible for the deal with South Omaha. The bond issue currently before the South Omaha City Council stipulated that the Columbus canal would provide power exclusively for South Omaha. Babcock wanted a canal system that would provide water and power to anyone who wanted it.<sup>51</sup> The next week, Babcock resigned as head of the NCI.

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., November 6, 1908, p.5, and December 4, 1908, p.1.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., January 8, 1909, p.1.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., January 15, 1909, p.5.

He assured everyone that his resignation had nothing to do with the his differences with Jaeggi. He was president of the Nebraska Power Company which was going to finance the canal, and he did not want to create a situation that could cause a conflict of interest. He and Jaeggi had supposedly resolved their differences at the Commercial Club meeting.<sup>52</sup> Other than the change of leadership, Babcock had nothing new to announce to the Club. Both he and Jaeggi were very close to closing their deals--Jaeggi in spite of the opposition of the Omaha Electric Company. They reminded Club members, and all residents, to promote the canal whenever possible to visitors and in places they visited.<sup>53</sup>

By the end of March 1909, all disagreements between the Babcock and Jaeggi factions had been settled, and all water rights transferred from the NCI to the Nebraska Power Company, for which the members of the old company would get a total of four million dollars in stock in the new company.<sup>54</sup> By the end of April, Babcock's negotiations with eastern financiers and a Chicago construction company had progressed to the point where work on the canal was promised to begin before the end of the year. Babcock met with the directors of NCI on Tuesday, April 27, 1909 and announced that the New York financiers and the construction company had signed tentative contracts to finance and build the

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., January 22, 1909, p.1.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., January 22, 1909, p.1.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., March 26, 1909, p.1.

Columbus power canal. The contracts were only preliminary and contained many conditions that would allow the firms to back out, but Babcock assured the NCI that this was a sure thing. At the meeting, the NCI decided to liquidate and let a trustee handle any business they would have with the project.<sup>55</sup> By the beginning of July, 1909, it seemed as if the canal would soon be a reality. The Amberson Hydraulic Company had ratified a permanent contract with the Nebraska Power Company, and had only to complete work on a few other projects and complete negotiations for financing. The company planned to begin awarding sub-contracts by October 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>56</sup> A week before that date, Babcock announced that there had been a “bit of a hitch” in the negotiation process, but he was confident that it would be resolved and work on the project would begin soon.<sup>57</sup>

While Babcock was courting the East Coast investors, Fritz Jaeggi was working on his Swiss contacts. He brought a group of investors to the site in mid-May 1909. The Nebraska Power Company felt that the Swiss interest was strong enough to justify delaying the election of new officers, usually accomplished at the annual stockholders’ meeting, until Jaeggi heard back from

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., April 30, 1909, p.1.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., July 9, 1909, p.1.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., September 24, 1909, p.5.

them.<sup>58</sup> By the spring of 1910, the Swiss had promised to finance and build the Columbus Power Canal. They offered to purchase the Nebraska Power Company and stated their intention of immediately financing a company to start the project. Stockholders of the Nebraska Power Company were to get a “liberal” amount of stock in the proposed new company. Babcock was not present at the sale, but his associates claimed that his absence was not a statement of his opinion of the deal.<sup>59</sup> No one seemed overly enthusiastic about the promises the Swiss had made, and even the *Telegram* was subdued in its report of the sale. When Babcock arrived in town a week later, he gave a statement to the *Telegram* assuring everyone that he supported the sale and that negotiations with the Swiss were going well and were supposed to be completed in about two months.<sup>60</sup> The week after Babcock’s return, the stockholders of the Nebraska Power Company met in Omaha. Seventy-five percent of the stock was represented, and the meeting approved the sale of all stock, water rights, and property to the Swiss financiers. The *Telegram* reporter thought it “quite a remarkable coincidence that nearly all the stock not represented and voted is [sic] held in Columbus.”<sup>61</sup>

At the end of the decade, the only progress the Swiss had made was

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., May, 21, 1909, p.5.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., April 15, 1910, p.1.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., April 29, 1910, p.1.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., May 6, 1910, p.5.

further surveying of the area. In August 1910 they sent a team to survey the canal route to determine the company's course of action. Some Columbus residents were disturbed when they heard that the Swiss planned to build only part of the originally planned canal system and put the power station at Genoa instead of at Columbus. The *Telegram's* informant assured people that the Swiss had abandoned that course of action.<sup>62</sup> In December, a second team conducted more surveying, this time for a new site for the proposed reservoir. Apparently, the Swiss had determined that the original route planned for the canal would not work, and had radically changed the proposed route for the canal, and found a new site for the reservoir as well.<sup>63</sup>

Despite the project's many setbacks, businesses and municipal governments of other towns frequently expressed interest in the project throughout the 1900 to 1910 decade. As early as 1902, the owner of the Lincoln electric railway system was eager to buy power from Columbus' proposed system if it proved to be cheaper than his current steam-based power source.<sup>64</sup> Businesses like Nichols - Shepard Co. and Milwaukee Harvester planned to put branch offices and warehouses in Columbus on the assurance that the proposed canal would soon

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., August 19, 1910, p.1.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., December 9, 1910, p.1.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., January 31, 1902, p.1.

supply them with power.<sup>65</sup> In 1907, Columbus Mayor G.W. Phillips spoke before visiting representatives of the Lincoln Commercial Club. During his talk, he claimed that electricity generated by the proposed canal could help Lincoln increase its manufacturing potential, and hinted that financial support for the project would be appreciated.<sup>66</sup> The Lincoln Club sent a letter to the Columbus Commercial Club, thanking them for their hospitality, in which they mentioned interest in power from such a canal, but did not offer any financial support for the project.<sup>67</sup> Union Pacific became interested in the canal project in 1908, and sent one of their general solicitors to represent the canal company during some of Babcock's negotiations. The railroad's backing was welcomed not only for its financial assistance, but also for its political influence. U.P. would be a partially local customer, giving a reason to keep at least part of the canal's power output at home.<sup>68</sup>

Towns in the Columbus region recognized the benefits of a hydroelectric power system, and many of their commercial clubs began buying stock in the canal company; however, the municipal governments hesitated to give more

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., January 9, 1903, p.1.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., May 31, 1907, p.1.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., June 7, 1907, p.5.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., April 24, 1908, p.1.

substantial financial backing.<sup>69</sup> Babcock and Jaeggi pitched the canal so well in Omaha and South Omaha that promotional articles began appearing in the newspapers of those cities. Many of those articles blatantly suggested that the power canal was to be built for the sole purpose of supplying power to the Omaha area.<sup>70</sup>

People did raise concerns about the project. Farmers worried how the diversion of creeks and the Loup river would impact their water supply. A farmer who was leasing land that lay along the proposed canal route found a clause in his lease which stipulated that if the canal were ever to become a reality, his lease would terminate immediately.<sup>71</sup> Upon finding out how much water the State Board of Irrigation had allowed Babcock's company to commandeer, a Lincoln man urged Nebraska citizens to demand that the state government step in to prevent corporations from getting that much control over the state's water.<sup>72</sup>

Babcock's consistent failure to secure financial backing for the Columbus power canal project was a typical course of events for a Nebraska water project in the early twentieth century. Extensive irrigation/hydroelectric power systems

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., January 29, 1909, p.1.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., August 6, 1909, p.6.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., June 29, 1907, p.1.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., September 10, 1909, p.8.

were too expensive to finance with only local capital, and as Babcock learned, eastern capitalists were hesitant to invest large sums of money in the Midwest after many people had defaulted on loans during the depression of the 1890s.<sup>73</sup>

Government funding for hydroelectric projects was scarce during this era, and Babcock did not seem to be interested in pursuing the few options offered at that time. The Reclamation Act of 1902 was funded through land sales, which meant that most of the projects it funded would be located in the far western states.<sup>74</sup> In 1904, the *Telegram* published an article about a two million dollar government appropriation for a similar project in the Big Horn basin area, but did not include any commentary or call to action for Babcock and his colleagues to attempt to try to get financial support from the government.<sup>75</sup>

The project may not have been entirely technologically possible in the early 1900s. To irrigate the extent of territory that Babcock envisioned would have required pumps to move water from low lying areas to higher ground. Few farms were equipped with electricity to run pumps, and other fuels were not cost effective.<sup>76</sup> H.E. Babcock did not live to see the fulfillment of his dream. He

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<sup>73</sup>Firth, *Public Power in Nebraska*, p.5.

<sup>74</sup>Steve Schafer, "Economics and Finance," in *Flat Water: A History of Nebraska and Its Water*, ed., Charles A. Flowerday, Resource Report no.12, Lincoln: University of Nebraska, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Conservation and Survey Division, March 1993, p.119.

<sup>75</sup>*Telegram*, March 11, 1904, p.1.

<sup>76</sup>Leslie F. Sheffield, "Technology," in *Flat Water*, p.87.



promoted the canal until his death on December 14, 1917, and then the project was forgotten until 1932, when it was revived for the dual purpose of extending Nebraska's electrical power and irrigation system and for putting Depression-era Nebraskans to work.<sup>77</sup> The Columbus power station began operation on March 5, 1937, and most of the work on the peripheral areas was completed by the end of 1938 at a cost of \$8,894,324.91.<sup>78</sup> *Telegram* editor Edgar Howard was serving a term in Congress when the project's revival was announced, and was reported to have received the news enthusiastically.<sup>79</sup>

Loup Public Power District (LPPD), Nebraska's first public power utility, is quite different from the vision H.E. Babcock and Fritz Jaeggi had for the system. Two power plants, in Columbus and Monroe, annually provide 133.5 million kilowatt hours of power to 50,000 people.<sup>80</sup> Omaha and Lincoln are not among the twenty-three communities served by LPPD, but the two reservoirs, Lake North and Lake Babcock, do serve as recreational areas as the *Telegram* promised.

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<sup>77</sup>Firth, *Public Power in Nebraska*, p.114.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, pp.114,133.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>80</sup>Nebraska Public Power District, "General Information," *Loup Power District* <http://www.loup.com/>, 1996, p.1.

# The City of Power and Progress

## Chapter 3

H.E. Babcock's proposed power canal promised to be the solution to Columbus' recurring power shortages. The electric power-providing system that had been set up in the late nineteenth century was rapidly becoming outdated and inadequate to serve Columbus's growing population. It had the additional drawback of being privately owned, which meant that the city council usually had to go through several rounds of negotiations with the owners when they wanted to extend service to more people. Since Babcock's power canal continually failed to materialize, and winter "coal famines" inflated the price of coal almost every winter, the city council was faced with the challenge of finding a safe, reliable source of power to furnish power for a rapidly growing town.

Columbus's first electricity plant began operation on December 23, 1885. It was very small, and provided service almost exclusively for Schroeder's flour mill.<sup>1</sup> A few years later, Alphonse Heintz started a larger plant on Eleventh Street between Twenty-second and Twenty-third Avenues.<sup>2</sup> Heintz's plant

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<sup>1</sup>G.W. Phillips, *Past and Present of Platte County Nebraska: A Record of Settlement, Organization, Progress and Achievement*, vol.1 (Chicago: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1915), p.275.

<sup>2</sup>Margaret Curry, *The History of Platte County, Nebraska*, (Culver City, California: Murray and Gek, 1950) p.400.

adequately supplied power for the town's streetlights (which were run only four or five hours each night), and for the few buildings which used electricity until the beginning of the twentieth century. As the twentieth century began, more establishments began installing electric light. The first among these--the Methodist parsonage, St. Francis Academy (a Catholic school), and St. Bonaventure Catholic Church--all had electric lights by the end of 1900.<sup>3</sup> At about the same time, the city council decided to illuminate Columbus's streets for the entire night.<sup>4</sup> The plant was able to handle the strain of these additions, but it was apparent that the town would soon require more power than the present facility was able to provide, so the council began to discuss the best method(s) for increasing Columbus's power generating capacity and the best ways to finance such projects. In December 1900, the *Telegram* made a suggestion toward the latter issue. On December 13, the newspaper ran an editorial suggesting that if the city enforced its dog tax, it would soon be able to pay for a new electric light plant.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout 1901, more businesses installed electric lights, and the Columbus Women's Club demanded more lights in Frankfort Park. The city granted the Club's request, and placed three more lights in the park.<sup>6</sup> Heintz

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<sup>3</sup>*Columbus Weekly Telegram*, February 22, 1900, p.5; October 18, 1900, p.5; November 15, 1900, p.5.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, September 6, 1900, p.5.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, December 13, 1900, p.5.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, May 17, 1901, p.1.

periodically upgraded his equipment to keep up with the town's growing demand. On November 1, 1901, he announced that he had ordered a new main dynamo which would have twice the capacity of the present one.<sup>7</sup> Two weeks later, he put all the streetlights in the northern part of town on one circuit.<sup>8</sup> Demand for electric power was increasing at such a rapid rate that Heintz's improvements barely allowed him to supply an adequate power level.

Over the next two years, three new power and fuel supply options came to the Columbus City Council's attention. The first option was presented by E.E. Benedict from Omaha who had come to Columbus with a proposal to build a gas plant. He claimed that the process of making gas from coal oil provided a cheaper source of power than electricity.<sup>9</sup> The other two options came before the council during a coal shortage in January, 1903. The state legislature was considering a bill to appropriate fifty thousand dollars to sink six wells within Nebraska to look for deposits of coal, natural gas, and petroleum at great depths. Columbus was one of the proposed sites, so the Commercial Club wrote to Columbus's representatives urging them to press for the bill's passage.<sup>10</sup> Finally, a representative of a Boston firm came to Nebraska to try to generate interest in

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., November 1, 1901, p.1.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., November 15, 1901, p.1.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., July 11, 1902, p.1.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., January 30, 1903, p.1.

central heating systems. He claimed that his system would enable a town to heat its businesses and some residences using hot water or steam.<sup>11</sup>

As the City Council investigated its options, Heintz's plant again reached the limits of its capacity. In mid-December, 1903, Heintz announced that he had ordered a new, larger engine for the main dynamo.<sup>12</sup> A few days later, he approached the city council with a request to reduce the number of hours the streetlights operated to limit strain on the old engine. The council rejected his request, and the old engine was able to withstand the strain for the remainder of the year.<sup>13</sup> The new engine arrived around the beginning of 1904, and the town had to function without streetlights for more than a week while Heintz and his crew installed it.<sup>14</sup>

Matters reached a crisis point when Heintz appeared at a late February City Council session and stated that the current power providing arrangement was not cost-effective for him. He appealed to the Council for either more money for operation or for permission to use a different type of lamp in the streetlights. The Council believed that it was already paying enough for electrical service, so it referred the matter to a committee which was already exploring the possibility

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., December 18, 1903, p.1.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., December 25, 1903, p.1.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., January 8, 1904, p.1.

of supplying power for the streetlights through the municipal water station.<sup>15</sup>

Throughout the spring of 1904, the Columbus City Council rejected several alternatives for solving the streetlight crisis. In mid-March it began taking bids from contractors for the construction of a new electricity plant. By the end of March, an Omaha-based electric company had submitted a bid for building a new power station. Their representative claimed that the firm could build a new station for between \$4,500 and \$5,000--plus the cost of equipping the plant.<sup>16</sup> The Council considered the bid, but did not accept it. Two months later, the Council rejected a proposal to test gasoline lights. It thought that such lamps would not be adequate to Columbus's needs.<sup>17</sup>

The most promising alternative seemed to be a gas plant. Several Columbus representatives went to Norfolk in April to examine their system of piping gas created from refuse petroleum into homes.<sup>18</sup> The Council did not take immediate action upon their observations. However, when Dr. Heintz approached the Council that summer with a proposal for a five-year contract for providing power for the city, it rejected the offer, claiming that such a long contract was not in Columbus's best interest. The *Telegram* speculated that the real reason the

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., February 26, 1904, p.3.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., March 25, 1904, p.5.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., May 27, 1904, p.7.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., April 27, 1904, p.1.

Council had refused to enter the contract was that it planned to build a gas plant, and purchase streetlights that could be run by manufactured gas to replace or supplement the existing electric streetlights.<sup>19</sup>

The Council held a special session on September 23, 1904, to decide whether to award E.B. Pickhardt, a speculator from the East Coast, a franchise to build a gas plant capable of providing energy for Columbus's streetlights. Pickhardt claimed that he could build a plant that would produce enough power for fifty to seventy-five 60-candle power streetlights in the business district. He estimated that the city's cost would be twenty-five dollars each for fifty lights or twenty-two and a half dollars each for seventy-five lights.<sup>20</sup> Deliberations lasted until the beginning of October. Pickhardt was awarded the franchise and immediately hired a Chicago construction company to build the plant.<sup>21</sup>

By the end of October, the Chicago contractor had estimated that the plant would be operational by the beginning of December. The committee that was in charge of determining the placement of the extra lights had found suitable sites in the business district, and had decided to put one near each church and at two-block intervals in the residential areas.<sup>22</sup> Construction of the plant began on

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., June 17, 1904, p.3.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., September 30, 1904, p.1.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., October 21, 1904, p.1.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., October 28, 1904, p.5.

November 10, 1904. All the equipment needed to operate the plant was supposed to be en route from Chicago.<sup>23</sup>

The project hit its first snag only days after construction began. Gus Schroeder, owner of a near-by flour mill, had contested the site of the plant. The dispute was settled within a few days, and less than two weeks after construction began, the building was ready for the mains to be laid, and the contractor was confident that he would still be able to meet the January 15, 1905 deadline. Pickhardt initially planned to call his organization the Consumers' Gas Company, but soon decided to call it the Columbus Gas Company since it would be providing power for the city as well as for private consumers.<sup>24</sup>

Work on the plant stopped at the beginning of December. The crew had reached a point in the project when they needed authorization to continue, and none of the people who had the authority to give them permission to continue were in town.<sup>25</sup> The people of Columbus were becoming concerned about the future of the project. Some City Council members were suggesting that the Council should continue to consider a municipal power plant which they believed would ultimately be more beneficial to the city.<sup>26</sup> Fears were allayed when a

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., November 11, 1904, p.1.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., November 18, 1904, p.5.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., December 9, 1904, p.5.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p.3.



member of the Board of Directors of the Columbus Gas Company returned to town and authorized resumption of construction.<sup>27</sup> A week later, the Columbus Gas Company filed its articles of incorporation, and Pickhardt transferred his deed to the lot to the company.<sup>28</sup> The gas mains still had not been laid after the first of the year. “Financial cobwebs” prevented progress, but people closely involved with the project were certain that the disagreements would soon be resolved, and the plant would be ready by February.<sup>29</sup>

Problems at Heintz’s plant caused the streetlights to malfunction during the first few weeks of 1905. This was particularly aggravating to town boosters because Columbus was hosting the state Firemen’s Convention. To partially compensate for the lack of streetlights, the City Council asked businesses to keep kerosene lights and candles burning at night during the convention, but warned them to pay attention to fire safety.<sup>30</sup>

In mid-January, the Gas Company and the construction supervisor went before the City Council to ask for an extension of the deadline for completing the plant. They claimed that the continued delays were due to the unscrupulous people with whom Pickhardt had been dealing. The *Telegram* declined to predict

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., December 16, 1904, p.5.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., December 23, 1904, p.5.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., January 6, 1905, p.5.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

whether the Council would grant the extension, since several Council members were having second thoughts about the project.<sup>31</sup> The Council did not grant an extension, but local investors formed the Columbus Fuel & Light Company. They planned to buy Pickhardt's building and complete it, or, if that was not possible, they would erect a new building at a different site. Either way, they hoped to start providing gas by the beginning of May for cooking, heating, and lighting.<sup>32</sup> The fire chief's annual report supported their cause. Four of the thirteen fires in 1904 had been caused by gasoline used to light or heat homes.<sup>33</sup>

The City Council was rapidly losing interest in the gas plant project. In mid-February, it awarded Dr. Heintz a five-year contract which was subject to nullification if H.E. Babcock ever produced his power canal and Heintz and the city could not agree on a rate adjustment. Heintz planned to install an entirely new system of streetlights over the following three months. The new system would have nineteen 375-watt arc lights which would be lit until midnight, and forty 16-candlepower incandescent lights which would operate all night. This arrangement would cost the city \$2,030 annually, which was cheaper than the estimated \$3,000 per year required to run a municipal plant. Heintz planned to put the arc lights in the business district and in some important residential

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., January 13, 1905, p.1.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., January 27, 1905, p.1.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., January 31, 1905, p.5.

districts. The remainder of the residential areas were to be illuminated by incandescent lights placed at intervals designed to guarantee maximum illumination.<sup>34</sup>

By the end of February 1905, the gas plant was a dead issue in Columbus. Pickhardt's franchise had expired and the City Council rescinded it. The investment group which had planned to buy the building was no longer interested. They claimed that without the streetlight contract, the gas plant would not be a profitable venture, so they asked the Council to defeat their proposal. One opinion about gas plants that was expressed to the *Telegram* was that gas plants were not economically feasible in towns with populations less than ten thousand.<sup>35</sup> The building remained unfinished, and the equipment lay where it had been stacked.

Dr. Heintz soon experienced problems fulfilling his contract. The equipment he had ordered for the new system of streetlights did not arrive until the end of March. He had his crews scrambling to set up the new system, but he could no longer guarantee that it would be operational by May 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>36</sup> Continued expansion rapidly rendered the new system inadequate. Late in November 1905, residents living west of the Meridian Road requested more

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., February 17, 1905, p.8.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., February 24, 1905, p.1.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., March 31, 1905, p.1.

streetlights in the area. Heintz warned the city that setting up and illuminating the additional lamps would raise his operating costs above the level at which he could make a profit, since his contract had been drawn up with only two lights located in that area. As a compromise, the Council asked for bids for putting in two kerosene street lamps.<sup>37</sup> Two weeks later, the Council's Streetlight Committee decided that people living west of the Meridian Road would have to wait for additional illumination. The committee suggested that the Meridian Road residents might be able to speed up the process by wiring their homes for electricity, which would make streetlight installation cheaper by eliminating the cost of residential wiring from Heintz's operating expenses.<sup>38</sup> Requests for more streetlights continued through 1906.

The Columbus City Council had dismissed the idea of a gas plant, but Columbus businessmen were still willing to consider gas as an alternative to electricity. At the end of December 1905, a Columbus bank official went to Chicago to see if anything that Pickhardt had arranged had come to fruition.<sup>39</sup> He did not return with encouraging news, but three local men applied for a gas plant franchise in early 1906. By mid-May, the ordinance had passed two

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., November 24, 1905, p.7.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., December 8, 1905, p.7.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., December 20, 1905, p.5.

readings and had been given to a committee. A final reading was due soon.<sup>40</sup>

In August, the local applicants still had not received a positive response, but two eastern construction companies had sent representatives to Columbus to look over their site and bid the job. Both companies bid the job at about twenty-five thousand dollars. Local response was unenthusiastic. No one made any definite decisions or made a move to form a gas company.<sup>41</sup>

. The City Council did not take action on a gas franchise until May, 1907. Early in May the latest group of franchise-seekers wanted their contract to contain a clause that would give the city the option of purchasing the plant after ten years of operation. The only publicized difference of opinion was over the determination of the purchase price. The franchise-seekers wanted the price determined by the plant's earning capacity. Some Council members thought that the plant's actual value should determine its price. They expected to settle the issue at a special meeting scheduled for Friday, May 3, 1907.<sup>42</sup> A week later, the franchise application passed its final reading. The Council remained split on the issue of the method of determining the purchase price, and on the issue of whether the city should receive a five percent royalty after the plant had operated

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., May 11, 1906, p.1.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., August 10, 1906, p.1.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., May 3, 1907, p.1.

for ten years and the city had decided not to purchase it.<sup>43</sup> At the end of May, the Columbus Gas Company began subscribing stock. It had to subscribe twenty-five thousand dollars, half of its authorized capital, before it could award a contract for construction. For a short time, Columbus citizens would have exclusive rights to buy stock. The *Telegram* urged readers to buy as much stock as they could afford, to show their confidence in local industry, and pressed the point by stressing that such stock usually paid good dividends.<sup>44</sup>

As the gas company began selling stock, Dr. Heintz offered to sell his electric light plant to the city. Both sides appeared enthusiastic about the deal and had hired appraisers to try to come to a price agreement. Heintz claimed that the city would eventually be able to operate the waterworks plant with surplus power from the electricity plant. Once they were linked, the operating costs would be only slightly more than running one of the plants.<sup>45</sup> The appraisers set the tangible assets of the plant at \$18,700, but set its total valuation at \$30,000 due to its high earning potential. The City Council was not willing to pay the full thirty thousand dollars, so it began negotiating with Heintz for a price closer to twenty thousand dollars. Heintz claimed that he was willing to be

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., May 10, 1907, p.1.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., May 24, 1907, p.5.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid.

liberal in the negotiation process.<sup>46</sup> Despite Heintz's claims, his negotiations with the city broke down in July, 1907. Heintz had been holding out for a price near the plant's thirty thousand dollar valuation, and the City Council did not want to put such a large price on a ballot for voters' approval, especially since the plant would require extensive upgrading before it would be capable of supplying enough power to operate the waterworks station.<sup>47</sup>

A week after the negotiations for the electric light plant broke down, the gas franchise owners announced that they wanted all of their stock subscribed before construction of their plant began. They wanted to be able to buy materials without using credit, which, they hoped, would cut construction costs enough for them to realize a profit after the first year of operation. Most of the stock had already been sold locally, and people in Omaha were supposed to be eager to purchase the rest. The *Telegram* made another pitch to Columbus citizens to buy more stock and keep the money at home. A successful gas plant, it mentioned, would make it possible for all homes to use gas rather than coal for cooking, making the chore less uncomfortable for women.<sup>48</sup> A local business had already begun selling gas stoves.

Materials for the gas plant began their journey toward Columbus in

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<sup>46</sup>Ibid., June 29, 1907, p.5.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., July 12, 1907, p.6.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., July 26, 1907, p.5.

August, 1907. The contractor provided some free publicity by hanging banners announcing that the material was “bound for Columbus, that live town which is attracting so much attention in Nebraska” across the nine freight cars needed to carry the material.<sup>49</sup> As soon as the materials were shipped, the gas company began taking subscriptions for residential gas use. The company encouraged people who wanted to use gas to convince their neighbors to use it too, since the company was only going to run lines into neighborhoods where several people wanted gas.<sup>50</sup> Canvassing for gas subscribers ended late in August. People were encouraged to sign up for service during this last canvas, so their lines would be run while main line work was being done, saving them money. The *Telegram* also advised its readers that there was still a little bit of stock left for purchase.<sup>51</sup>

Work on the gas plant began in September, 1907. Some residents in the area, believing that the production process of the manufactured gas would emit noxious fumes, had threatened to disrupt construction, but had not taken action. The *Telegram* attributed this to the residents’ learning that a gas plant would not give off nearly the amount of fumes that a coal-burning plant would. The contractor claimed that he would employ only Columbus men for the project if

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid., August 2, 1907, p.5.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., August 16, 1907, p.5.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., August 23, 1907, p.5.



enough were available.<sup>52</sup> The City Council determined that the gas mains would lay ten feet from the center of the street on the same side as the water mains. In alleys, the mains would be three or four feet from the center.<sup>53</sup> The Gas Company began a series of demonstrations on the safe operation of gas stoves on Saturday, October 19, 1907 at the company's headquarters in the building just north of the *Telegram* offices.<sup>54</sup>

While work on the gas plant proceeded, John T. Burke, a representative from an unidentified Omaha firm offered to purchase Dr. Heintz's electricity plant for its appraised value. His company would then make improvements to the plant so it could power the waterworks station and supply power, heat, and light for the town seven days a week, 365 days a year. In return, the firm expected Columbus to enter a five-year contract for pumping water, and supplying the wells and pumps to do so. The Omaha firm also wanted a five-year contract for streetlights. The Council promised to look into the proposal.<sup>55</sup>

The City Council initially rejected the Omaha company's offer. Instead, it hired a consulting engineer as it investigated the feasibility of granting a franchise for a new electric power plant. The franchise-seeker planned to build a station

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., September 13, 1907, p.5.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., September 27, 1907, p.5.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., October 18, 1907, p.5.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

capable of running Columbus' streetlights and powering the waterworks station.<sup>56</sup> J.T. Burke formally submitted his request for an electric light franchise in early December 1907. The Council decided not to put the bill up for reading until it had a better idea of citizens' opinions about a new electric power station.<sup>57</sup>

Discussion of the electric light franchise was the main topic of the December 20<sup>th</sup> City Council meeting. Its terms had already been altered and were expected to go through several more revisions. The Council had inserted an option for the city to purchase the plant at certain times of the franchise. Other additions included giving consumers renewal of their subscriptions at cost, giving the city a portion of the gross income after a specified time of operation, and regulating the kilowattage. Several people had voiced concerns over the slow pace the Council was taking in the consideration of this issue. The *Telegram* advised these impatient people to be thankful that the Council was investigating the proposal so thoroughly.<sup>58</sup>

As the City Council was pondering the proposed new electric light franchise, the gas plant was completed. It began limited operation on December 10, 1907, primarily for providing power for the electric streetlights in the business district. Some air was still trapped in the gas mains after construction was

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., November 15, 1907, p.1.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., December 13, 1907, p.1.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., December 20, 1907, p.1.

completed, but the gas company promised that the trapped air would be forced out within two weeks and the quality of the gas would improve. The company would then be able to offer a wider variety of services to more people.<sup>59</sup> The directors of the Columbus Gas Company formally accepted the gas works from the contractor on Thursday, January 23, 1908. The inspector reported that the plant's product was of excellent quality, and that the system was one of the most complete and economical that he had seen.<sup>60</sup>

A month after the Columbus Gas Company took possession of the gas works, the first gas-related accident was reported. T.J. Cottingham, one of the founders of Columbus's Independent Telephone Company, was overcome when the pilot light of the gas heater in his bathroom went out. His wife heard him hit the floor and called a doctor, who revived him.<sup>61</sup> The second major problem occurred in January 1909. Repair work on the Thurston Hotel's gas system went wrong, and the resulting explosion injured several people and demolished the hotel's kitchen and dining room. Other portions of the building were damaged, but most guests were able to return to their rooms. The accident could have easily escalated into a full-scale disaster. Several people, already paranoid about recent earthquakes in Italy and Nebraska, panicked and ran toward the tornado

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., December 13, 1907, p.5

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., January 24, 1908, p.1.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., February 21, 1908, p.1.

shelters, where they could have been overcome by gas or trapped by fire, rather than trying to exit the building.<sup>62</sup>

The City Council granted J.T. Burke an electricity franchise at the beginning of February, 1908. The terms of his franchise required that he purchase the Heintz plant within two months and build a new structure within a year. Electric power consumers were notified that their billing system would change when the new plant began operation. At that time, they would be charged by the quantity of electricity they used. Consumers of large quantities of electricity would pay a lower rate per kilowatt than users of small amounts of power.<sup>63</sup>

Burke immediately began fulfilling the terms of his franchise. Before the end of February, he had organized a corporation with \$150,000 capital, and had purchased the Heintz plant--for \$1.00. There is no further official information on this unusual transaction. The record of the sale at the Platte County Register of Deeds office states that Alphonse Heintz sold the plant and the lot for one dollar, cash. The current Register of Deeds believes that the low sum was to offset the assessed value of the plant and land which the new owner would have had to pay to the government. This would have allowed the new plant to realize a profit much sooner. Heintz likely received a large amount of stock in the new

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., January 29, 1909, p.1.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., February 7, 1908, p.1.

company sub rosa as the major portion of his compensation.<sup>64</sup>

Thus far, there had not been any noticeable change to the streetlight operation, but the *Telegram* was willing to give Burke some time.<sup>65</sup> Electricity supply had not changed because Burke's company was still operating in Heintz's old facility. In April, Burke placed his first order for equipment for the new plant which was supposed to be delivered around August 1<sup>st</sup>, and said that his company was not going to salvage much of Heintz's plant.<sup>66</sup> At the beginning of July, the Columbus Electric Light and Power Company began erecting poles for its new system.<sup>67</sup> Heavy machinery for the plant arrived in mid-August. Some of it was so large, it had to be set in place before the walls were built.<sup>68</sup>

In March 1909, the power company put an electric sign along the entire length of the powerhouse which they felt would advertise Columbus's cosmopolitan nature to all passers-by.<sup>69</sup> A few weeks later, the City Council rejected Burke's offer to replace the current street lighting system with more lights of less power. It did instruct its Streets and Grades Committee to recommend locations for up to seventy-five 32-candlepower incandescent lights in

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<sup>64</sup>Interview with Margie Sergent, Platte County Register of Deeds, February 8, 1999.

<sup>65</sup>*Telegram*, February 28, 1908, p.5.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, April 24, 1908, p.1.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, July 3, 1908, p.5.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, August 21, 1908, p.5.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, March 5, 1909, p.1.

the residential districts. The Council would allow the power company to use tungsten or ordinary lights.<sup>70</sup>

Although the new plant was not yet complete, the power company was doing quite well financially. Its capital stock had doubled to three hundred thousand dollars, and inspectors promised that once the plant was completed, it would be the best power plant in Nebraska outside of Omaha and Lincoln.<sup>71</sup>

W.J. McCalley of Kearney had accepted the position of permanent manager. Burke, who had been the acting manager, was going to resume his primary duties of developing electric power in other towns.<sup>72</sup>

In April, the company increased the number of arc lights to nineteen and added several incandescent lamps.<sup>73</sup> Soon after this improvement, the company filed for a large mortgage with the First Trust & Savings Bank. Some citizens were concerned about the size of the mortgage, but the manager assured them that the company had placed such a large bond issue only because it had not wanted to file two smaller mortgages during a short timespan. The company planned to hold forty-five thousand dollars worth of the bonds in reserve against the time in the near future when they would have to expand to meet the ever-

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., March 19, 1909, p.1.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., March 26, 1909, p.1.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., April 16, 1909, p.1.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., p.5.

growing demand for electricity.<sup>74</sup>

Consumers soon became disgruntled with the electric company's new system of billing. Former Mayor R.S. Dickinson gave a petition to the City Council, asking for an investigation into the company's billing practices. He and several other consumers thought that the company was charging them more than the agreed-upon rate.<sup>75</sup> The Council ordered the electric company to establish a uniform demand service within three months, rather than continuing to charge different rates based on the amount of power a customer used. It requested that any electric power customers who had grievances against the electric company file them with the City Council. The original complaint was referred to the Judiciary Committee.<sup>76</sup>

A month later, several more electricity consumers had filed complaints. They asked the City Council to make the power company establish a flat rate since the sliding scale system seemed to be consistently costing them more than they expected. J.T. Burke spoke before the Council on the company's behalf. He said that the company's books were open for anyone to inspect, and that he thought the problem was due to customers' inadequate understanding of the sliding scale system. He explained that the system had been set up to keep

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., May 14, 1909, p.1.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., July 2, 1909, p.1.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., July 9, 1909, p.1.

summer and winter bills at similar levels. During summer, when use was down, customers were charged at a higher rate. When use increased during winter, the rate would be lower.<sup>77</sup> Consumers had not yet had the benefit of seeing lower-than-expected winter electricity bills. Complaints continued to pile up during the next two months, so at the beginning of October, the City Council announced that it was going to hire an investigator to look into the claims of fraudulent rates advertised by the electric company. Customers who felt that they had complaints were encouraged to furnish information.<sup>78</sup>

The gas company was experiencing problems of its own. It had accrued a considerable debt during 1909. The company secretary claimed that the debt was necessary because it had extended its mains farther than it had originally planned, and had taken on many new customers. Stockholders' opinions of the debt varied greatly. Some had complete confidence that the company would soon show a profit, but some exceptionally disgruntled stockholders were selling their stock below their purchase price.<sup>79</sup> In May 1910, residents living near the gas plant filed a complaint, claiming that the plant was giving off odors and gases that were unpleasant and unhealthy.<sup>80</sup> Two months later, someone filed a complaint

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid., August 13, 1909, p.1.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., October 8, 1909, p.1.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., January 21, 1910, p.3.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., May 27, 1910, p.7.



that refuse from the gas plant, which was carried to the Loup River by the sewer system, was killing fish in the river, but the *Telegram's* check of the river did not confirm the report.<sup>81</sup>

Problems with the electric company also continued through the end of the decade. In March 1910, the City Council finally relented to pressure to replace the arc lights in Frankfort Park with four incandescent tungsten lamps.<sup>82</sup> The plant had an emergency shutdown on the morning of July 17, 1910 when a nail in a bearing damaged an engine. The company suspected sabotage.<sup>83</sup>

The issue of rates was far from resolved. The electric company cut off R.S. Dickinson's power in November, 1910 because he had not paid his bills. He and others complained that the company was still not charging its promised rates. He told the *Telegram* that he would like to have his electrical service reconnected, but he would only pay his bills at the price to which he had originally agreed.<sup>84</sup> The *Telegram* advertised the beginning of the rate hearings as November 29<sup>th</sup>, and an editorial claimed that the only way to end the controversy was for the city to own the plant. It also claimed that many of the people now complaining about the rates were the same people who had been most loudly

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<sup>81</sup>Ibid., July 22, 1910, p.1.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid., March 11, 1910, p.1.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., July 22, 1910, p.1.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., November 11, 1910, p.1.

proclaiming that a private company would furnish lower rates than a municipal plant.<sup>85</sup>

At the hearing, the electric company was required to explain how it figured its rates. The company representative did not really answer the question, but made a long speech that varied from being conciliatory because people were confused about the rate assessment, to defiantly asserting that the company had done nothing to violate its charter, and insisting that Columbus had some of the lowest rates in the state.<sup>86</sup> Dissatisfied with this response, the Council gave the issue to a special committee for investigation, and the year ended without a resolution of the crisis.

During the disputes over electricity rates and the heavy debts of the gas company, citizens would occasionally mention the possibility of municipal ownership of the plants, but the City Council never seriously considered that option because neither plant produced enough energy to run the waterworks, and it believed that the slightly higher cost of municipal operation would raise energy bills beyond the level that customers were currently protesting.

Developing power within the city limits was not a quick and easy process, but rural Platte County residents had to wait even longer for a cheap, reliable, safe source of power. The first attempts at rural electrification did not occur

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<sup>85</sup>Ibid., November 25, 1910, p.4.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., December 2, 1910, p.1.

until 1923, and widespread rural electrification in Nebraska did not occur until the 1940s.<sup>87</sup>

The Columbus Municipal Waterworks station was established in 1886. It was powered by steam until 1909 when the new electric power plant was completed and the two plants were connected.<sup>88</sup> The city did not have nearly as much trouble keeping up with demand for water as it did with the demand for streetlights and residential power, but it did experience a few problems.

In the spring of 1900, the city sank two six-inch wells at the waterworks. When the fire department staged a fire-drill to test the wells, they proved to be inadequate for Columbus's needs. Several people had ignored the city ordinance that required them to shut off their city water connections when the fire-emergency alarms sounded. The Water Commissioner claimed that he would strictly enforce the ordinance during real emergencies. The penalty for not turning off city water connections during fires was one hundred dollars per offence, and the miscreant was subject to imprisonment until the fine was paid.<sup>89</sup>

The City Council completely remodeled the waterworks interior in 1901 to accommodate a new, upright boiler, and all the work was accomplished without

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<sup>87</sup>Robert E. Firth, *Public Power in Nebraska: A Report on State Ownership* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), pp.159 and 162.

<sup>88</sup>Phillips, *Past and Present*, p.271.

<sup>89</sup>*Telegram*, May 24, 1900, p.5.

disruption of service.<sup>90</sup> In the spring of 1902, additional repairs were completed; another new well was sunk and the pumps were overhauled; and other, unspecified, repairs and improvements were under consideration.<sup>91</sup> The city's next project, approved by the City council in February 1903, was to extend the water mains into the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward in the northeastern part of town. The fire chief recommended putting a fire hydrant somewhere in the heavily populated neighborhoods near the 3<sup>rd</sup> Ward school.<sup>92</sup>

To finance these repairs and improvements, Columbus had three separate water funds: the Waterworks Maintenance Fund, the Waterworks Bond Fund, and the Increasing Water Supply and Improvement of the Water Works Fund. In mid 1902, the total of these funds was about thirteen thousand dollars.<sup>93</sup> Continual improvement, repair, and growth of the waterworks system stretched the limits of the funds' revenue, so in August 1902, Columbus citizens were informed that their rates would go up in May 1903. To prevent some of the grumbling that would follow the announcement, the Water Commissioner reminded people that Columbus's water rates were one and a half to two and a half cents per one

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid., January 10, 1902, p.1.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., June 13, 1902, p.1.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., February 27, 1903, p.1.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., May 16, 1902, p.3.

thousand gallons lower than in most of the surrounding towns.<sup>94</sup>

Losing access to city water during fires and rising rates were not the only problems water consumers faced. Until 1903, the Union Pacific Company used Columbus's water system to clean its boilers. Proper cleansing required higher than normal pressure, which was often more than the city's pipes could withstand. So most, if not all, city water customers were frequently without water for several hours on boiler-washing day. After a particularly widespread service disruption in December, 1902, the *Telegram* announced that U.P. was building its own water system. The newspaper concluded that the loss of the company's water rent money was a small price to pay for the end of the inconvenience of disrupted service due to burst pipes.<sup>95</sup> U.P. cut its connection to the city's water supply during the last week of February, 1903. Its water softening tank was not yet complete, but the company's chemists claimed that the water in the new well was pure enough to clean the boilers until the tank was finished.<sup>96</sup>

Water customers were hit with another rate-hike in early 1906. The city explained the new rate system in November, 1905. Consumers paying a flat rate would pay eighty cents more each month, and metered rates would increase to twenty cents per one thousand gallons. Hospitals would pay ten cents per one

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<sup>94</sup>Ibid., August 29, 1902, p.8.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., December 12, 1902, p.1.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., February 27, 1903, p.1.

thousand gallons. Customers were responsible for maintaining their meters. The Water Commissioner promised to impose fines up to double the meter-rate on people who tried to use city water for free by not fixing broken meters.<sup>97</sup>

Despite the Water Commissioner's warnings about keeping water meters in good condition, several people attempted to use city water without paying for it. The Commissioner's office published a list in the *Telegram* of people who were in arrears to the city.<sup>98</sup> In February 1910, the Committee on Waterworks was authorized to purchase meters for the service pipes of customers who wanted flat rates.<sup>99</sup>

The new rate system proved to be a great benefit to the water funds. The Water Commissioner announced in his May 1, 1906 to November 2, 1906 semiannual report that in the six-month period, the new water rates had resulted in a \$150 surplus, bringing the total surplus in the funds to \$300, which the Commissioner planned to use for repairs and improvements.<sup>100</sup> The new rates continued to support the waterworks without too many complaints from customers, and within a year the waterworks station was self-sustaining and had realized a

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<sup>97</sup>Ibid., November 10, 1905, p.6.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid., August 13, 1909, p.1.

<sup>99</sup>Ibid., February 25, 1910, p.7.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., November 9, 1906, p.1.

profit of almost five hundred dollars.<sup>101</sup>

Higher rates did not guarantee flawless service, because equipment failure and human error still caused service disruptions. One instance of the latter gave Columbus residents a rare experience--a rain shower in January. In early January 1908, an engineer on duty at the waterworks was distracted by his pet chicken and forgot to turn off the power to the station's standpipe, which overflowed and caused a three block long "rain storm" on Twelfth Street.<sup>102</sup>

As the new electricity plant neared completion, the city council hired a contractor to draw up plans for remodeling and improving the waterworks so the new plant could supply it with power.<sup>103</sup> The final stage of converting the waterworks from steam to electric power was scheduled for Sunday, March 21, 1909. The Water Commissioner warned Columbus residents that their water would be turned off at 7am and remain off for an indefinite time period.<sup>104</sup> By mid 1910, the electric light plant was powering the waterworks satisfactorily, but the city planned to build a steam main between the waterworks and the electric light plant's boilers so the waterworks could still run off steam if the electricity

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<sup>101</sup>Ibid., May 24, 1907, p.1.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., January 17, 1908, p.1.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., September 11, 1908, p.5.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid., March 19, 1909, p.1.

failed.<sup>105</sup>

In October 1909, the City Council announced that in the next general election Columbus voters would decide whether to issue ten thousand dollars worth of bonds for improving the waterworks system. Estimated costs for the entire project were closer to fifteen thousand dollars. The Council had originally planned to put the entire fifteen thousand dollar issue on the ballot, but found out that a city of the first class could only vote a maximum of ten thousand dollars worth of bonds each year. The Council was not pleased with that restriction, but the city needed to repair and improve the waterworks, and new wells were especially needed since the water supply in the existing wells had begun to run dangerously short.<sup>106</sup>

Despite this dire need, the Council decided not to put the bond issue on the ballot. It claimed that Columbus would eventually get to vote on the bonds, but not until the Council resolved some problems that had arisen. To increase the water supply, the city sank five tubular wells. The Council authorized Mayor Louis Held to borrow three thousand dollars for the project if the treasury could not support it.<sup>107</sup> A few months later, the council decided to divert money from the Loup River bridge bond fund to the waterworks project rather than borrow

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<sup>105</sup>Ibid., April 8, 1910, p.6.

<sup>106</sup>Ibid., October 22, 1909, p.4.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., December 10, 1909, p.1.



the money. To replace the diverted money, the council planned to levy a general waterworks improvement tax which they thought would replenish the Loup River bridge bond money before it was needed.<sup>108</sup> Eight months later, the city registered waterworks improvement bonds and put them on deposit in the German National Bank.<sup>109</sup>

At the end of 1910, the waterworks was completely self-sustaining and was realizing an annual four thousand dollar profit. The Water Commissioner recommended a rate reduction from twenty cents per one thousand gallons to fifteen cents per one thousand gallons, but the City Council was reluctant to approve a rate reduction. Expensive work still needed to be done to the system, and the waterworks improvement bonds were not selling well on the market.<sup>110</sup> With a municipal waterworks, an electric light plant, and a gas plant, Columbus was well on its way to forming its reputation as “the city of power and progress,” a term coined in the 1930s during construction of the Loup Power Canal.

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<sup>108</sup>Ibid., February 11, 1910, p.1.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., October 14, 1910, p.10.

<sup>110</sup>Ibid., November 25, 1910, p.1.

# The Automobile Comes to Columbus

## Chapter 4

Automobiles gave people unprecedented mobility. Their owners could travel farther for a day's business or entertainment without having to plan all of their travel around train schedules or the slow speeds of horse-drawn conveyances. Farmers could spend more time conducting business and socializing in town instead of spending most of their time traveling to and from their destination. Doctors and postal workers were able to carry out their services more quickly. As more automobiles arrived in Columbus, they became more than just an alternative means of transportation. The town's business and social patterns transformed because of the arrival of the automobile.

Columbus had an unpleasant introduction to the automobile in 1903. Two unidentified men had been driving around town and collided with a carriage. There were no serious injuries or any significant damage done, but Columbus people had their first experience with what would become a common occurrence over the next several years.<sup>1</sup> Despite a negative first experience, automobile ownership still became a status symbol to many Columbus people as well as a

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<sup>1</sup>*Columbus Weekly Telegram*, July 17, 1903, p.1.

relatively fast means of transportation. In 1904 Dr. Francis Heman became the first Columbus resident to own a “personal” automobile, which prompted many more men in the community to seriously consider obtaining one for themselves.<sup>2</sup> Dr. B. Tiesing soon ordered one, and other men began feverishly looking through catalogs.<sup>3</sup>

By the end of April 1904, motorists were showing off their new purchases throughout the Columbus area, and people experienced a new spectrum of annoyances. One of the most common complaints was against drivers who neglected to turn their head and tail lights on after dark, which caused several accidents with pedestrians. The *Telegram* reiterated the law for those who were ignoring it: lights must go on within a half hour after sundown.<sup>4</sup>

Even more dangerous was a favorite “game” of inconsiderate drivers. A carload of people would pass a team while gunning the engine, which usually scared the horses and created a “runaway” incident. The motorists would then drive on, laughing at the havoc they had created. Farmers were the most common targets of these pranksters, and they soon began requesting that automobiles be included in the laws which required threshing machines to stop

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<sup>2</sup>Margaret Curry, *The History of Platte County, Nebraska* (Culver City, California: Murray and Gek, 1950), p.538.

<sup>3</sup>*Telegram*, April 22, 1904, p.1.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, July 31, 1908, p.5.

when meeting teams.<sup>5</sup> More considerate motorists pulled over to the side of the road until a team passed, allowing the horses to get used to the sight, sound, and smell of an automobile.<sup>6</sup>

Motorists had few incentives to change their careless or mischievous habits. Although the municipal and state governments had already begun passing laws to regulate automobile operation, enforcement was minimal. A motorist who caused a serious accident might be cited, but lesser violations were rarely punished. The accident reports and other editorials commenting upon automobiles that ran in the *Telegram* through 1910 typically described violations and pled to the City Council to do something to enforce automobile ordinances rather than announcing a motorist's punishment for deliberately causing a runaway or driving too fast.

Some prominent farmers who had been frequently victimized by rude motorists eventually decided that they would not conduct business with anyone whom they saw driving an automobile. The *Telegram* understood their reasoning, but did not agree with their decision. Many farmers and their families had been injured in runaways since automobiles appeared in the area, but the newspaper suggested that the farmers were taking a course of action that would probably hurt them more than it hurt motorists. With each passing year, automobiles became more common in the area, and if the farmers had stuck to their

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., April 29, 1904, p.1.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., August 19, 1904, p.1.

resolution, they would not be able to conduct business with anyone within a short timespan. The *Telegram* advised the farmers to consider a different course of action for dealing with the problem.<sup>7</sup> Despite censure of “the game” in the newspapers and precautions taken by courteous motorists, automobiles frightening horses continued to be a problem, especially during an unexpected meeting. To prevent as many chance meetings as possible, farmers living south of the Loup River requested that the county thin out the willow trees growing near the riverbank. The trees blocked farmers’ view of the road they were about to intersect, and they could not see approaching autos until they were almost on top of them.<sup>8</sup>

Chance meetings between teams and automobiles was not the only cause of runaways. Horses shied and ran from many of the sights, smells, and sounds associated with a town: doors slamming, dogs barking or nipping, paper blowing across their path, or an unfamiliar object placed in the wagon they were pulling. Many of the first motorists in Columbus, especially women, claimed that they much preferred their mindless, placid automobiles over their teams. However, people who had welcomed the arrival of the automobile as the ultimate solution to the “runaway” problem soon found out that automobiles were capable of running away, often less predictably than horses. A one-armed man from

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., September 27, 1907, p.1.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., October 22, 1909, p.9.

Spaulding was killed when his engine died and his auto started rolling downhill backward. He lost control of the machine, it went over an embankment, and overturned. His four passengers escaped with minor injuries, but the driver was pinned under the steering wheel, which crushed his chest, driving pieces of his broken ribs into his lungs.<sup>9</sup>

As more models became available, owners began comparing the speed and durability of their automobiles. Howard Clarke, Columbus's self-proclaimed premier automobile enthusiast, bragged that he could make the two hundred mile round trip between Omaha and Columbus in about eight hours if he discounted the time spent during frequent stops.<sup>10</sup> The railroad companies had corporate cars for use by their employees who traveled extensively, and one model driven through Nebraska for advertisement made the forty-seven mile trip from Fremont to Columbus in one hour and thirty-three minutes while heading into a storm.<sup>11</sup> Howard Clarke traded in his touring car for a new "Reo" in 1905. The new car had a noiseless exhaust system that ran much more quietly than most other models, and Clarke claimed that it could climb hills at twenty-five miles per

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., June 6, 1910, p.1.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., September 23, 1904, p.1.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., April 21, 1905, p.1. At the end of the twentieth century, the drive between Columbus and Fremont takes about forty-five minutes, and the drive between Columbus and Omaha takes about an hour and a half if the driver stays within the speed limits.

hour.<sup>12</sup>

Automobile speed and endurance comparisons continued through the end of the decade. Two Columbus boys chased a jackrabbit down a country road and had reached a speed of thirty miles per hour when they abandoned the chase at a “T” intersection where the jackrabbit ran straight into a field and they were forced to turn.<sup>13</sup> In 1908, a family from Omaha covered the ninety miles between their home and Columbus in three and a half hours. Unfortunately, by the time they were ready to leave Columbus, a storm had moved into the area and they were forced to store their automobile and return to Omaha by train and retrieve their auto at a later date.<sup>14</sup> Several national and international road endurance rally courses passed through Columbus, where participants stopped for food and fuel. Once Columbus had repair garages, they often contracted to supply repairs as well as fuel.

Automobile repair was difficult for a few years for Columbus’s first automobile owners. Blacksmiths could generally pound out minor dents, but if an automobile owner could not do other repairs himself, or find someone in town who could, he usually ended up shipping the machine by rail to the nearest mechanic. Local repair became available for most models in 1907 when Joe

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., July 21, 1905, p.1.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., April 3, 1908, p.1.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., May 8, 1908, p.5.

Early built a repair garage.<sup>15</sup>

Enforcement of national laws provided an excellent opportunity for some local young entrepreneurs. As of July 1, 1907, gasoline could only be dispensed into red cans. When Chris Nauenburg, the oil man, made his rounds that day, he had to turn down about half of his customers who requested gasoline because they did not have red gasoline cans. A few enterprising young boys took advantage of the situation and began accompanying Nauenburg on his route with cans of red paint. If a customer wanted gasoline, but did not have a red can, the boys quickly painted one of the customer's non-red cans. The price depended upon the size of the can, and each of the boys involved made several dollars to spend at the Fourth of July festivities. Nauenburg refused to fill inappropriate cans because both he and the customer were subject to a fifty dollar fine if authorities found out that he had put gasoline into an unapproved container.<sup>16</sup>

Some people could not understand why regulations for dispensing gasoline existed until they had firsthand experience with its volatility. Just outside of Columbus, a man was using a lighted match as a light source to look underneath his car. The match ignited some leaking gasoline or fumes, and the resulting explosion hurled him away from the automobile. The machine was soon engulfed

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., August 30, 1907, p.1.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., July 5, 1907, p.1.



in flames and utterly destroyed. The owner escaped with only minor injuries.<sup>17</sup>

The first car theft in Platte County occurred on the night of December 11, 1907. Ira Connor stole a Ford touring car from Fred Laun, a farmer who lived near Platte Center. A light snow had fallen that evening, so the next day, Platte County law enforcement officers were able to follow the vehicle's tracks as far as Genoa before the snow melted. They alerted the surrounding counties that the thief might be headed their way.<sup>18</sup> The Adams County sheriff apprehended Connor a few days later about eighty miles southwest of Columbus in Prosser, asleep in the vacant barn where he had hidden the car. The sheriff demanded a one hundred fifty dollar fee from Laun before he would release the vehicle. The *Telegram* interpreted the sheriff's demand as an attempt to snatch the reward money rather than as collecting an impound or finder's fee, and it did not think that the Adams County sheriff had a right to collect reward money until a court of law proved that Connor was the thief.<sup>19</sup> Connor was speedily tried and convicted. Before the end of 1907, he was sentenced to one year in the state penitentiary. He supposedly got off easy since he did not have any other offenses on record in Platte County.<sup>20</sup> (See Figure 4.1, p. 112)

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., July 1, 1910, p.1.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., December 13, 1907, p.1.

<sup>19</sup>*Telegram*, December 20, 1907, p.1.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., December 27, 1907, p.1.

By 1908, it was apparent that automobiles had become a permanent part of the local culture. By that time, there were twenty-three automobiles in Platte County with a total value of seven thousand dollars, with most models in the area being worth between one hundred and five hundred dollars.<sup>21</sup> The most affluent automobile enthusiasts ordered a new model every few years and sold their old machines to other people. The Park livery stable included an automobile among its stock for hire.<sup>22</sup> Automobiles became an attraction in the Fourth of July festivities beginning in 1908 when several automobile owners organized a parade of decorated autos.<sup>23</sup>

Rather than send all the money for purchased automobiles to Omaha and other large cities, Columbus people started opening their own auto dealerships. The first one mentioned in the *Telegram* was Max Gottberg's repair garage which served as an agent for Ford and Jackson automobiles.<sup>24</sup> In May 1909, the Gottberg Garage announced that it had Ford's latest Touring Car and Roadster available for \$850 and \$825, respectively.<sup>25</sup> The market for used automobiles was also growing. Local and out-of-town dealers frequently advertised the availability

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., May 1, 1908, p.5; June 19, 1908, p.5.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., May 8, 1908, p.5.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., June 19, 1908, p.5.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., July 10, 1908, p.5.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., May 7, 1909, p.5.

of good used cars.<sup>26</sup> Motorcycles appeared in Columbus in 1908.<sup>27</sup>

Two more repair garages and a showroom opened in 1909. The first one, located on Eleventh Street, included both a repair garage and a Ford dealership showroom.<sup>28</sup> The second repair garage, a fireproof structure built by the Columbus Automobile Company (CAC), appeared toward the end of 1909 on West Thirteenth Street. The building's hot water heating system was supposed to insure that the temperature inside the building never fell below forty degrees Fahrenheit.<sup>29</sup> The new company soon began selling a wide variety of automobiles, ranging from runabouts priced at five hundred dollars to large seven-passenger models selling for three thousand dollars.<sup>30</sup> The CAC offered to store automobiles in its temperature-controlled garage during the winter months so the machines would not freeze during especially cold weather.<sup>31</sup> By the end of 1910, Joseph Discher's Cadillac showroom was under construction at the corner of Thirteenth and M streets.<sup>32</sup>

Livestock dealers became concerned about the future of horse sales as

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., October 9, 1908, p.5.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., August 28, 1908, p.1.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., April 9, 1909, p.1.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., October 15, 1909, p.1.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., November 5, 1909, p.7.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., October 7, 1910, p.5.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., November 11, 1910, p.7.

more people purchased automobiles. Stock dealer Tom Branigan continued to have several highly successful sales in Columbus each year until 1909, despite his worst fears that the introduction of the automobile to Columbus in 1904 would immediately ruin his horse-dealing business. In 1909 there was still a high demand for good horses, but traveling dealers like Branigan could not afford to buy, feed, and constantly travel with them and still hope to make a profit from sales in small towns, since the animals were so expensive.<sup>33</sup> By the end of 1909, Tom Branigan had moved his business to Omaha to eliminate the cost of constant travel with livestock, and his brother John had formed a partnership in Columbus with William J. Voss, a buggy dealer who had recently decided to branch out into automobiles. John Branigan and Voss planned to sell a wide variety of autos, including Chalmers-Detroit, Studebaker, and Maxwell.<sup>34</sup>

Full enjoyment of automobiles was difficult without a system of roads that was in good condition; however, promotion of a state or nation-wide network of roads required an organized effort. Columbus automobile owners joined the effort in July 1909, when several automobile enthusiasts from Columbus and the surrounding area formed the Columbus Automobile Club, an affiliate of the American Automobile Association. Their primary goal was to promote the Good Roads Movement in the Columbus area. They were also dedicated to recreational

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., April 16, 1909, p.1.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., August 20, 1909, p.5; October 29, 1909, p.8; November 26, 1909, p.4.

driving. Only days after forming, the club was organizing a series of horse and automobile driving races in conjunction with the Columbus Driving [horses] Club.<sup>35</sup>

Good roads were essential for extensive automobile use, but newly graded roads could create a false sense of security for motorists. The first serious accident in the Columbus area happened on December 22, 1905, four miles east of Columbus. Three men traveling to Des Moines were thrown from their Cadillac when the automobile's steering mechanism broke after the car drifted too close to the center of the newly graded road where dirt had been piled too high. One of the men, a hitchhiker, was not injured. A second man was pinned under the car and suffered a broken collarbone. The third man was taken to St. Mary's Hospital with serious internal injuries. The car had been going about twenty-five miles per hour when the driver lost control.<sup>36</sup>

The city began regulating traffic flow in 1909 in response to complaints that motorists were driving at unsafe speeds through areas in which pedestrian traffic was concentrated. Speed limits were set at ten miles per hour in the business district and in densely populated residential areas. Other residential areas had speed limits of fifteen miles per hour, and state laws applied elsewhere.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., July 9, 1909, p.1.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., December 29, 1905, p.1.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., June 11, 1909, p.1.

Some residents of the Meridian Road did not think that the new ordinance was enough of a deterrent to the speeders in their area. Unidentified residents created a rudimentary speed bump by dropping a pile of sod and loose dirt across the road near Councilman Fred Elia's home. Motorists soon began avoiding the area.<sup>38</sup>

Serious enforcement of the speed ordinances did not begin until the middle of 1910. Several accidents had occurred because motorists were blatantly ignoring the speed limits. Two police officers were stationed on each end of the street where the most accidents had happened. They were to take down the license numbers of all speeders, and these numbers would be checked at the vehicle registration department in Lincoln to get the owners' names.<sup>39</sup> The newspaper article did not mention *how* the two officers were to determine vehicles' speeds. The most likely method would have been to give each officer a watch, and they would time all the vehicles passing through the distance between them.

A minor controversy arose as the city decided whether or not vehicles that were carrying doctors to emergency calls were exempt from the speed limit ordinances. Two doctors' chauffeurs were arrested for speeding. Dr. C.D. Evans' chauffeur was released without penalty, but Dr. Allenburger's driver had to pay a fine and court costs. Allenburger claimed that the city was playing favorites.

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., June 29, 1909, p.5.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., June 24, 1910, p.5.

The police said that the same procedures had been followed in both cases, but Allenburger's chauffeur had pled guilty and Dr. Evans' chauffeur had claimed that he believed that he was exempt from the ordinances while he was driving the doctor to an emergency call with a red cross on the front of his car.<sup>40</sup>

The coming of the automobile changed life in Columbus as dramatically as it did elsewhere, and it took several years for residents to adjust to its presence. As the machines became more common, they caused fewer runaways--both because horses were becoming accustomed to them and because more farmers drove automobiles to town. Buggy dealers and many dry goods merchants soon found their businesses transforming. By 1910, dealers like William Voss and John Branigan had altered their advertising to focus primarily on automobile sales, and had allowed their buggy inventory to dwindle or they eliminated it entirely. Dry good merchants had begun selling more items associated with protecting motorists from dust and fewer buggy-related items.

Pedestrians soon learned to avoid automobiles in the streets, but excessive speed remained a source of friction between motorists and other people for several years. Most people could find some common ground on the issue of poor road conditions, and auto enthusiasts' organizations like the Columbus Automobile Club were a major factor in convincing the local and state governments to make more of an effort to improve road conditions. As more

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., July 22, 1910, p.1.

farmers purchased automobiles, the *Telegram* began noting larger attendance at holiday celebrations and other special events, and complaints about motor vehicles scaring teams dwindled, although they did not disappear entirely. One of the issues that Columbus sales clerks tried to get their employers to accept was holiday closings and fewer hours of operation on Saturdays. Not until 1909, when several farmers owned automobiles and were not restricted to Saturday and holiday trips to town, did Columbus merchants agree to this demand.

Although automobile prices were falling by 1910, the machines were still status symbols. Despite their potential for bringing business from rural areas and other towns, many Columbus residents who did not own automobiles resented the noise, odd smells, and new dangers they brought to streets and country roads, as well as the superior or malicious attitudes of many motorists.

Farmers who did not own automobiles continued to have problems with the automobile-craze for several years. As late as 1917, the Farmers' Union Business Association was complaining to the Columbus City Council about the lack of hitching posts along the side streets of the business district. The Streets and Grades Committee had removed all but a few posts that were located in inconvenient spots, and the farmers were petitioning to have more posts reinstated.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., January 5, 1917, p.1.



Area involved in Ira Connor's 1907 auto theft (Figure 4.1)<sup>42</sup>



<sup>42</sup>State Maps on File, *Nebraska Counties and County Seats* (New York: Facts On File, Inc., 1984).

# A Pleasant Place to Walk

## Chapter 5

Columbus residents frequently complained about the poor condition of their sidewalks, streets, and sewer system. Wet wooden sidewalks and streets made of dirt were treacherous, even if they were in good repair. The sewer system, which existed primarily to channel run-off water to the Loup River, frequently backed up because the north side of Columbus, which is farther from the river, is at a slightly lower elevation than the southern portion of town. The effects of this pioneer-town system were dangerous sidewalks and large puddles of water stagnating in the streets after rain or snow. By setting standards for sidewalk construction, maintaining the streets, and improving the sewer system, Columbus citizens created an environment that was pleasant and safe for pedestrians.

Rather than constantly repair wooden walks, many people were beginning to lay brick or cement sidewalks in front of their homes and businesses. The *Telegram* urged all residents and business owners to follow this pattern by proclaiming that a permanent walk made an improvement to the appearance and value of the adjoining property. Early in 1901, the city responded to numerous complaints about dangerous wooden sidewalks by passing an ordinance requiring

that all new sidewalks be made of vitrified brick, cement, or flagstone. Existing wooden sidewalks could remain as long as their owners kept them in good condition.<sup>1</sup>

Several months later, people were still constructing new wooden sidewalks. The City Council then began enforcing the sidewalk ordinance somewhat more stringently. The Council also determined that if more than a third of an existing walk needed repair, the entire walk had to be replaced with compliant materials.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, some businesses were not vigilant about keeping their sidewalks free of debris and weeds. In late August 1901, “a lady” asked the *Telegram* to publish her complaint about sandburrs growing along several sections of sidewalk in the business district.<sup>3</sup> Non-compliance with the sidewalk ordinance was so widespread that the Council published a list of people who needed to lay or repair sidewalks in the business or residential areas.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the publication of the list, complaints about dangerous sidewalks continued. Several of these complaints were sent to the *Telegram* office. To make sure that future complaints would get to the right place as quickly as possible, the paper ran an editorial that told people to send their complaints to

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<sup>1</sup>*Columbus Weekly Telegram*, April 5, 1901, p.1.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, August 23, 1901, p.1.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, September 13, 1901, p.2.

the City Council. It also chastised the mayor and the Council for being so slow in the enforcement of the sidewalk ordinances.<sup>5</sup>

The Council did not take decisive action until the next spring. In April 1902, the mayor promised that all of Columbus' sidewalks would be safe by the end of summer. The Streets and Grades Committee was to examine all the sidewalks in town and give a report at the next month's City Council meeting.<sup>6</sup> Committee members found many new constructions that did not comply with the sidewalk ordinances and several old sidewalks that had to be condemned. The overall condition of Columbus' sidewalks was so poor that the Council called a special session for April 18, a week after the committee was given the project, rather than wait for the next regular session.<sup>7</sup>

The results of this special session were the creation of a Sidewalk Fund and a more active role for the city in regulating sidewalk construction. The Sidewalk Fund was created to subsidize enforcement of the ordinance and work that city crews did on sidewalks. The city treasurer's May 1, 1902 report indicated that the fund had \$336.59 one month after it was created.<sup>8</sup> In September, the city warned people who were still not complying with the

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., November 1, 1901, p.1.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., April 11, 1902, p.1.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., April 18, 1902, p.1.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., May 16, 1902, p.3.

sidewalk ordinance that they had only one more month to complete repairs to their sidewalks before the city took over the project. Work done on sidewalks would be billed according to the assessed value of the adjacent property.<sup>9</sup> The city did not actually begin sidewalk repair until February 1903.<sup>10</sup>

Enforcement did not stop at fining people for improperly constructed sidewalks. In July 1903, a warrant was issued for the arrest of Pat Murray, a prominent local businessman. He had torn down some structures on the corner of Thirteenth and Platte Streets, and had not removed the debris he had piled on the sidewalk.<sup>11</sup>

To further ensure the quality of future sidewalks, the City Council introduced a proposal to change the sidewalk ordinance. All sidewalk construction would fall under the jurisdiction of the Council's Streets and Grades Committee. Instead of relying on complaints from residents and spot checks by the Committee to regulate the materials used to construct a new walk, home and business owners would have to submit an application to the committee *before* construction of the walk began. Violations of the modified ordinance would be treated as misdemeanors.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., September 26, 1902, p.8.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., February 13, 1903, p.1.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., July 3, 1903, p.5.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., July 10, 1903, p.1.

The changes were not carried out in time to save the city from lawsuits resulting from injuries sustained during falls on dangerous walks. Robert Wagner won a suit against the city after he fell on an unrepaired wooden sidewalk, breaking his nose, damaging his optic nerve, and aggravating old injuries. He was awarded four hundred dollars and court costs.<sup>13</sup> In January 1904, the city faced another lawsuit due to the condition of its sidewalks. W.T. Allen claimed that a poorly maintained walk caused him to fall onto a gate. He was suing the city for the cost of a hernia operation that he claimed he needed to correct injuries he sustained in the fall.<sup>14</sup> Later in 1904, Peter Duffy won a suit against the Union Pacific Company for medical expenses and lost wages due to a fall on an unrepaired sidewalk.<sup>15</sup>

The promise of free postal delivery within the city limits proved to be a much better incentive than landscaping esthetics, higher property values, or personal safety for people to maintain their sidewalks. In 1904, Columbus's Post Office had a large enough volume of mail to justify free mail delivery service in town. Before the Post Office Department would allow the service to begin, several conditions had to be met. Chief among them was proof of proper condition of the sidewalks. A postal inspector had to be satisfied that a town's

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., January 8, 1904, p.8.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., January 22, 1904, p.1.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., August 5, 1904, p.1.

walks were reasonably safe for carriers before free delivery service could begin. When Columbus residents heard that they qualified for free mail delivery, they began an intense period of sidewalk building and repair.<sup>16</sup>

Mail delivery was enough of an incentive to make most people regularly repair their sidewalks, but debris and misuse of sidewalks continued to be problems through the end of the decade. Sidewalks provided a firmer, safer surface for bicycle riding than did the graded dirt and gravel of the streets. Collisions caused by careless riders did not happen very frequently, but they did cause enough injuries to prompt the city council into passing an ordinance that prohibited bicycle riding on the sidewalks.<sup>17</sup> Like many other ordinances the City Council passed, the “no bicycle riding on the sidewalks” rule was seldom enforced. Both the fire chief and the mayor vowed to enforce it, but neither followed through with the promise. Most riders were careful and courteous, and the unpaved streets were difficult to negotiate on a bicycle, so the ordinance was not enforced unless a bicycle rider injured or inconvenienced someone.

Pedestrians were more commonly troubled by debris on the sidewalks. To curb the problem, the City Council passed an “anti-spitting” ordinance during the September 21, 1906 session. The ordinance prohibited throwing cigar stubs, food waste, paper, and other unsightly refuse on sidewalks, in the parks, and any other

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., June 3, 1904, p.6.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., July 28, 1905, p.1.

place that people might gather.<sup>18</sup> The Council had unanimously approved the bill since its first reading.

Damaged billboards were another obstacle that pedestrians commonly encountered. Several had been allowed to deteriorate to the point where they were a danger to people passing under them. A few people thought the images on the billboards were more dangerous than the unrepaired materials used to support them. Some residents had complained about a few billboards that depicted full-length figures clad only in undergarments and requested that the city remove them. The Council granted their request, justifying the removal as ridding the area of “unsightly” billboards.<sup>19</sup>

Snow-covered sidewalks could hinder mail delivery to an entire neighborhood as well as endanger pedestrians. The *Telegram* was especially vocal about the prevalence of unscooped walks during the winter of 1909, and particularly noted that several walks in the business district remained unscooped for several days after a heavy snow.<sup>20</sup>

People who owned property that lay adjacent to street crossings faced an extra expense when the city began paving the crossings. Whenever a cement crossing was poured, the owners of the adjacent property were expected to extend

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., September 28, 1906, p.1.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., December 13, 1907, p.1.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., December 17, 1909, p.7.



their walks to meet it.<sup>21</sup> Pouring a cement walk did not always guarantee a level, smooth surface. During the summer of 1909, two sections of a cement sidewalk in front of Hinkelman's saloon on Eleventh Street suddenly rose four inches above the rest of the walk. Theories for the event included a minor earthquake, warping from the sun, and dust settling in an abandoned cistern. The latter was supposed to have caused the crossing near the sidewalk to sink, somehow pushing up only two sections of the walk.<sup>22</sup>

As human, animal, and eventually automobile traffic used the streets of Columbus, they required more frequent maintenance. Teamsters, farmers, and other people who frequently had to conduct business throughout the town expressed a desire for more thoroughfares rather than the maze of streets interrupted by blocks of land. Actions taken by Columbus's nineteenth century Village Board to gain favor with the Union Pacific Railroad Company made the creation of through-streets difficult for the twentieth century City Council. In 1866, the Village Board had granted several lots to U.P. for its exclusive use "forever."<sup>23</sup>

In 1900 the city asked the Union Pacific Railroad to remove its old, unused buildings and other detritus from West Nebraska Avenue. The city planned to improve Nebraska Avenue from the south side of Twelfth Street to the

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., August 9, 1907, p.1.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., July 2, 1909, p.1.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., September 10, 1909, p.1.

north side of Eleventh Street.<sup>24</sup> While the City Council was negotiating with U.P., the *Telegram* suggested that it also consider opening and improving M Street so children would have easier access to and from school.<sup>25</sup> By the end of March, the city declared that Platte and Murray Streets were open for public use. The city had condemned all property between the south side of Thirteenth Street and the north side of Eleventh Street toward Murray and all the property between Twelfth Street and Eleventh Street toward Platte.<sup>26</sup> In June, the Council ordered buildings and debris along parts of Murray (M Street), Quincy, Rickley, and Speice cleared to open Platte Street (P Street) from the south side of Twelfth Street to the north side of Eleventh Street.<sup>27</sup>

Opening M and P was not simply a matter of clearing away old buildings and debris. U.P. claimed to hold title to the land and refused to clear the lots, claiming it intended to build a freight depot at the site. As negotiations with U.P. over the M Street crossing continued, the Council gave its Streets and Grades Committee permission in April 1901 to open N and O streets from the railroad's right-of-way to the edge of town since it did not interfere with any

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., January 18, 1900, p.1.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., February 1, 1900, p.5.

<sup>26</sup>*Telegram*, March 29, 1900, p.5.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., June 21, 1900, p.5.

contested land.<sup>28</sup> After checking City Council reports from May 20, 1892, the Council claimed that U.P. only had a right-of-way at the M and K Street crossings, and did not possess a title to either piece of land.<sup>29</sup>

The Union Pacific Company obstinately clung to its claim to the M Street crossing and its plans for a new depot. Initially, the majority of the City Council voted to accept the railroad's decision. However, Israel Gluck, a prominent businessman, not only wanted M Street opened, but opposed the idea of a freight depot in the middle of the business district as well. He had entered a minority opinion stating that the city should fight U.P.'s claim to the M Street property. The City Council decided to follow Gluck's recommended course of action after he had amended the document so that he would bear the entire cost of any resulting litigation.<sup>30</sup> (See Figure 5.1, p. 140).

Less than a month later, representatives for Columbus and the Union Pacific Company were in a United States District courtroom in Omaha trying to come to an agreement. The progress of the case did not receive much attention in the *Telegram*, although it dragged on for three years. The District Court in Omaha decided that Columbus could not order the U.P. to vacate the contested land without going through condemnation procedures. This meant that Columbus

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., April 12, 1901, p.5.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., May 24, 1901, p.5.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., June 14, 1901, p.1.

would have to prove that the U.P. was not using the property involved, but the railroad insisted that it was going to begin clearing the area for its new depot and machine shop immediately.<sup>31</sup> City Attorney W.M. Cornelius, Israel Gluck, and Judge John J. Sullivan appealed the decision, claiming that the City Council of 1892 had not had the authority to grant the railroad exclusive use of the right of way.<sup>32</sup> In 1905, the Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the District Court's decision on the grounds that there had never been a road across M Street and the City Council of 1892 had indeed possessed the power to grant the railroad company perpetual and exclusive use of the right of way.<sup>33</sup>

Keeping the streets in good condition was more of a concern than which streets were thoroughfares to most Columbus residents. Ungraded and improperly graded streets soon became full of holes that collected water and were dangerous to human and animal limbs and automobile axles. William Poesch, a confectioner, attempted to sue the city for negligence in street maintenance. He claimed that some of his property had been damaged because the city had not properly graded and drained the street in front of his store.<sup>34</sup> The city attorney

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<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, April 8, 1904, p.1.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, December 23, 1904, p.5.

<sup>33</sup>*City of Columbus, et al v. Union Pacific Railroad Company*, 137 Federal Reporter 869, pp. 872-873 (Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals April 19, 1905).

<sup>34</sup>*Telegram*, September 27, 1900, p.5.

dismissed the suit,<sup>35</sup> but Poesch was only one of hundreds of people who complained about the condition of Columbus's streets.

Before 1901, the street commissioner's office apparently did not grade or repair the city streets in a systematic way. Newspaper articles imply that streets were repaired only when they desperately needed it, and then a crew would only dig enough to drain the existing water and fill in the worst holes. In May 1901, the street commissioner adopted a systematic method of grading Columbus's streets. Edgar Howard, the *Telegram* editor, was delighted. He firmly believed that properly graded streets would not only improve the town's appearance, but would also eliminate the health and safety hazards created by standing water in deep holes.<sup>36</sup>

Excavations of residential and business cellars provided most of the dirt for grading Columbus's streets. The city soon had more than enough dirt to properly grade every street in town. The Street Commissioner estimated that it would cost one thousand dollars to put all the town's streets in good condition.<sup>37</sup>

People living along the river banks were disappointed that the city did not reserve any of the dirt for replacing the dirt that the river washed away each year. Some people were desperate to keep their property from washing away,

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., October 11, 1900, p.5.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., May 3, 1901, p.1.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., October 11, 1901, p.1.

and began stealing loads of dirt from excavation sites. Dirt thieves were warned that people caught taking dirt from excavation sites or from the city's reserve piles would be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.<sup>38</sup>

Properly graded streets channeled water and made travel easier, but the process was slowed by a long period of wet weather and by dwindling funds. By the summer of 1902, only a few of Columbus's streets had been graded. Since only a small part of the street system was draining properly, some trouble spots became even worse. A large hole frequently formed in the low ground in the middle of Twelfth Street after a heavy rain. The problem was especially bad after a series of storms during the summer of 1902. The vicinity of the hole was reported to have taken on a swamp-like appearance, and the Street Commissioner had not taken any steps to correct the problem.<sup>39</sup> O and P Streets also had numerous holes where they intersected Thirteenth Street.

Frequent editorials about the conditions of the streets did get some results. H.E. Babcock, chair of the Council's Streets and Grades Committee, wrote a letter to the *Telegram* in response to complaints about all the stagnant water on the streets. He claimed that the grading was progressing as quickly as time and money would allow and asked people to be patient. He said that the streets were

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., May 10, 1901, p.5.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., July 18, 1902, p.1.

being graded in the order that would achieve the best drainage.<sup>40</sup>

The railroad companies and the city had different priorities for street repairs, which made draining water from the Meridian Road where it crossed the railroad tracks more complicated. The tracks were graded much higher than the street at that point, and water was trapped there after any substantial rainfall.<sup>41</sup> U.P. planned to cooperate with the city project and to make seven hundred dollars worth of improvements.<sup>42</sup> The city began its share of the regrading of the Meridian Road on October 1, 1903. The local contractor who was working on the city's share of the improvements was negotiating with U.P. and Burlington to complete their share of the work.<sup>43</sup> The railroad companies did not move as quickly on the issue as the city would have liked. More than a month passed between the time the contractor completed the city's portion of the job and the time the railroad companies awarded him the contract to complete their share.

Graded roads could still be difficult to travel. A newly graded road typically had a tall pile of dirt in the center, requiring vehicles to use only the sides of the road which were softer than optimal for wagon wheels and automobile and bicycle tires. To minimize the pile, the street overseer began

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., August 1, 1902, p.5.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., August 14, 1903, p.1.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., September 4, 1903, p.1.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., October 2, 1903, p.1.

using a cement roller to go over the pile after the scraper had finished. The entire road was then usable to most wagons and automobiles.<sup>44</sup> Unpaved roads required frequent sprinkling, especially during hot, dry weather. Until 1908, the city paid for street sprinkling only for the business district and the road to the Loup River bridge,<sup>45</sup> and the contractors often had a difficult time keeping dust settled in these areas. People tried several possible solutions to maximize the effects of sprinkling. The *Telegram* suggested sprinkling at night so the water would not evaporate so rapidly.<sup>46</sup> In 1907, the City Council employed another sprinkler truck in an attempt to satisfy people who were complaining about all the dust in the growing business district.<sup>47</sup> The extra sprinkler was not enough when people began asking the city to sprinkle residential streets. In 1908, the *Telegram* ran several editorials in favor of increasing the amount of money allotted to street sprinkling. The spring had been very dry and only a slight breeze was necessary to create clouds of dust.<sup>48</sup> Spreading oil over the dirt kept dust down longer than sprinkling with water, but the oil soiled shoes and clothing.<sup>49</sup> G.A. Schroeder, owner of the flour mill, had some success with a mixture of oil and

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., July 15, 1910, p.1.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., April 24, 1908, p.1.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., July 21, 1905, p.5.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., May 3, 1907, p.5.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., April 17, 1908, p.1.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., October 9, 1908, p.5.



coke refuse from the gas plant.<sup>50</sup>

Roads leading into Columbus were also in poor condition. In March 1901, the Platte County Board decided to build a “solid road” between Columbus and the Platte River bridge.<sup>51</sup> After the road was constructed, it was covered with alkali dust to make it more solid than the soft, sandy soil near the rivers would allow. Columbus was responsible for sprinkling the road from the city limits to the Loup River bridge.<sup>52</sup> The City Council ordered a large sprinkler truck equipped with extra-wide tires suitable for use on soft surfaces to carry out the responsibility.<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately, during its first season of use, the pump on the new truck frequently clogged with sand when the crew filled the tank with river water. The crew tried to design a pumping system that would filter out the sand before the water reached the pump apparatus.<sup>54</sup>

In the interest of generating more business for his flour mill, G.A. Schroeder proposed to the Commercial Club that they help Polk and Butler counties improve some of their roads so farmers could sell their grain in Columbus to get higher prices for it.<sup>55</sup> Within a week, the Club had raised one

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., April 15, 1910, p.7.

<sup>51</sup>Telegram, March 8, 1901, p.1.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., June 14, 1901, p.1.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., June 28, 1901, p.1.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., July 12, 1901, p.1.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., September 2, 1904, p.2.

hundred dollars toward the cause.<sup>56</sup> To improve the road to town on Columbus's side of the Platte River, the Club planned to purchase a King drag for grading and maintaining the road.<sup>57</sup> The King drag did not appear in Columbus until 1908. The King Drag Good Roads Association organized on June 11, 1908 after a demonstration of the King drag turned the Meridian road, normally one of Columbus' worst streets, into one of its best.<sup>58</sup>

Dragging was not enough to keep the road between Columbus and the Loup River passable. Periods of wet weather made frequent repairs necessary, but difficult. To find a way to make the road more durable, the YMCA Good Roads Club invited a federal government public works inspector to look at the road. The inspector recommended using a mixture of water, sand, and gumbo salt to make a more stable and durable road surface. He estimated the cost at \$1,200 for each mile of surfacing, which would have cost Platte County \$600 from Columbus to the Loup River and \$1,800 from Columbus to the Platte River.<sup>59</sup>

Paving Columbus's streets began at the street crossings. Jacob Glur laid an experimental cement street crossing at the intersection of Thirteenth and Olive

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., September 9, 1904, p.1

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., November 30, 1906, p.1.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., June 12, 1908, p.5.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., December 23, 1910, p.8.

in 1902.<sup>60</sup> The crossing worked well and received so much public acclaim that the city contracted several more crossings over the next eight years. City ordinances required that the crossings be constructed of concrete and be raised in the center so they would have the proper contour for water drainage, and would not have to be redone if the streets were ever completely paved. Glur claimed that the crossings would last a long time. Crossings he had made in Europe a quarter century earlier were reported to still be in good condition.<sup>61</sup> By 1907, the City Council had decided that cement crossings were worth the extra expense and created a special fund with \$1,700 for the project. Creating new crossings would take precedence over repairing old ones. The Streets and Grades Committee would set the priorities for replacement of old crossings.<sup>62</sup>

The next step toward completely paving the streets was the laying of “artificial stone” street gutters. City ordinances regulated placement of gutters so that they would not have to be moved if the streets were paved.<sup>63</sup> Glur laid the first gutter along the entire length of Eleventh Street in 1903. The gutters were supposed to be a big step toward solving Columbus’s street maintenance

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., May 16, 1902, p.1.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., August 15, 1902, p.1.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., January 25, 1907, p.1.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., October 24, 1902, p.1.

problems.<sup>64</sup> A year later, Columbus had about four blocks of guttering, and Glur was about to add more in various locations in the business district. The guttering had lived up to the city's expectations for carrying away excess water and had even kept water out of basements. Cement gutters were expensive, but the people who had them outside their businesses thought that they were worth it.<sup>65</sup>

The City Council considered paving the streets in the business district as early as 1904. Bricks from the local brick factory were suggested as a probable building material, but the Council did not act on the idea.<sup>66</sup> By 1907, the City Council was sure that Columbus's streets would eventually be paved, and began considering how wide they should be. After consulting representatives from other towns, most Council members favored thirty foot wide streets. Columbus's streets were eighty feet wide, so the Council decided that the extra space could be used for parking.<sup>67</sup> As time passed, more people began to favor the idea of paved streets. City officials were reluctant to pave before a sewer system was in place so they would not have to pay twice for paving Columbus's streets.<sup>68</sup> In the same issue that the *Telegram* reported the City Council's desire to put in a sewer

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid., June 12, 1903, p.1.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., May 13, 1904, p.1.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., May 20, 1904, p.1.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., February 22, 1907, p.1.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., September 24, 1907, p.7.

system before paving the streets, the paper launched an editorial campaign in favor of installing a storm sewer system to drain excess water from the streets.

Street paving began in the business district in 1910 in response to pressure from people who were unwilling to postpone paving streets until after a sewer system existed.<sup>69</sup> In March of that year, the City Council held an informal meeting to discuss the issues of improving the sewer system and paving the streets. Most people were in favor of paving, but there was a great deal of disagreement about whether Columbus needed an underground sewer system which would have to be built first. Those who favored improving the sewer system first argued that the cost of paving would be doubled if the sewers were laid later because all the paving would have to be ripped up. People who wanted to start paving immediately argued that concrete streets and gutters would solve most of Columbus's drainage problems.<sup>70</sup> Public health did not enter into the discussion since the system had been planned exclusively as a means to drain excess rain water.

The City Council decided that the cement gutters were adequate for drainage, and ordered paving to begin in late April 1910 on Olive Street. The first section of the street to be paved was the area near the railroad tracks and

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<sup>69</sup>Curry, *The History of Platte County*, p. 389.

<sup>70</sup>*Telegram*, March 11, 1910, p.6.

the platform area of the U.P. passenger depot.<sup>71</sup> In spite of the city's codes for regulating the process, an apparently serious error in curbing occurred when the Third Ward streets were paved. Several residents realized that the tops of their curbs were about two inches lower than the middle of the street. The Streets and Grades Committee was trying to determine whether the streets were too high or if the curbs were too low.<sup>72</sup>

As Columbus grew, the city extended streets into new and future residential areas and began opening more streets. Late in 1907, the city began surveying on the former White farm for an extension of Olive Street, dubbed "the White Road." The city planned to extend Olive Street northward through the White farm and to eventually meet the Hengler Road. Land near the planned White Road had already been partitioned into lots.<sup>73</sup>

The Council formed a special committee to look into the potential effects on traffic flow and property damage resulting from the proposed opening of Platte Street and closing portions of Quincy and Murray Streets.<sup>74</sup> The only anticipated property damage would be to Becher's Livery Barn, so the city approved the plan. Platte Street would be opened as soon as the U.P. removed their debris

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<sup>71</sup>Ibid., May 6, 1910, p.6.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., June 3, 1910, p.1.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., December 27, 1909, p.5.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., May 10, 1909, p.1.

and tore down the old freight depot.<sup>75</sup> Platte Street opened on November 27, 1907, and two days later, the *Telegram* proclaimed that it was already an important thoroughfare and had greatly improved the looks of the vicinity.<sup>76</sup>

Keeping waste water flowing steadily through a sewer system and preventing it from settling in puddles where it stagnated and contributed to street damage was as important an issue in street maintenance as was paving. The Columbus Sewerage and Drainage Company began the sewer system on December 1, 1891 in the business district and surrounding residential areas.<sup>77</sup> In the late 1890s, two new companies helped expand the system. The West End Sewer Company was incorporated in 1898. Three Franciscan nuns founded the Columbus East End Sewer Company in 1899, primarily to service their community.<sup>78</sup> The three companies never adequately finished the system, which consisted of trenches dug along the sides of the streets, lined with hard-packed dirt. The system was designed to carry run-off water to the Loup River, rather than handling waste or garbage. Because they were made of dirt, the sewer trenches needed constant maintenance, and because three companies were working on the system, repairs were made inconsistently. The street commissioner ordered

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., May 31, 1907, p.1.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., November 29, 1907, p.1.

<sup>77</sup>Phillips, *Past and Present*, pp. 272 - 273.

<sup>78</sup>Curry, *History Platte County*, p. 48.

several defective trenches to be completely filled in as early as 1902. The city clerk filed claims with the sewer companies for compensation for work done by the city's crews.<sup>79</sup>

The system did not adequately carry waste water away from all parts of town. At the end of 1900, the sewer was in such poor condition between the hospital and the river that citizens complained to the city and threatened to take the issue to court if the city did not act promptly.<sup>80</sup> The next summer, the West End Sewer Company announced that it planned to extend its sewer through blocks 84, 85, and 86 of the business district. The *Telegram* warned residents that the improvements had the potential to increase their taxes.<sup>81</sup>

Refuse piled in yards, alleys, and streets had become a threat to public health by 1902. The City Council began considering placing a city dump along the river bank at the end of North or Olive Street in April. Locating the dump along the river bank would allow the Loup to periodically carry everything away.<sup>82</sup> The Council approved the dump site at Olive Street in May.<sup>83</sup> Because the Loup River did not constantly carry the refuse away, the site had to be

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<sup>79</sup>*Telegram*, August 8, 1902, p.5.

<sup>80</sup>*Ibid.*, December 13, 1900, p.5.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, July 26, 1901, p.1.

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, April 18, 1902, p.1.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, May 23, 1902, p.8.



changed periodically. By 1907, the site had been changed from the south end of Olive Street to the end of the Meridian Road and then to the end of North Street.<sup>84</sup>

Good drainage in one part of town could cause problems in other areas. Once the sewer system had reached the Loup River, people living close to its banks noticed that the river bank had been eroding very quickly. In 1904, residents complained that the river had already consumed about three blocks of soil.<sup>85</sup> Extensive construction was also contributing to the drainage problem. When a foundation for a new building was excavated, the dirt was carried away for use in street grading. The site then had a large hole to catch water, and less dirt to absorb it.<sup>86</sup>

In an attempt to permanently solve the drainage problem, the City Council acquired the services of Andrew Rosewater, Omaha city engineer, to determine what type of sewer system would be best for Columbus.<sup>87</sup> The Council decided that a surface sewer system constructed of concrete, rather than an underground system of pipes, would most cost effectively meet Columbus's drainage needs. Funding for sewer system projects was available from the state, but only if a

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid., May 17, 1907, p.5.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., June 10, 1904, p.5.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., June 26, 1908, p.1.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., July 26, 1907, p.1.

town could be classified as a city of the first class. A special census conducted in August 1907 determined that Columbus met the population requirement (five thousand people) to qualify as a city of the first class.<sup>88</sup>

A year later, the project had not yet begun because the Council had reopened the debate over whether to construct a surface or underground sewer system. At this point, the sewer system was being planned only as a storm sewer to drain excess water rather than also installing a sanitary sewer system. Fifty people signed a petition to the City Council requesting a special election to vote bonds for a surface sewer system, and the Council referred the petition to a committee.<sup>89</sup> The committee soon recommended that the Council call a special election. The Council announced that on October 20, 1908 voters would decide whether the city should issue fifteen thousand dollars of bonds for a new sewer system.<sup>90</sup>

The Council held a mass meeting before the election to discuss the proposed system. The mayor was opposed to a surface sewer system, and pointed out that all the current above-ground system accomplished was moving excess water from one area of town to another. He cited the common belief that Columbus's northern portion lay lower than its southern portion, so water could

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<sup>88</sup>Ibid., August 23, 1907, p.1.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., September 11, 1908, p.5.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., September 18, 1908, p.5.

not naturally flow from the northern edge of town toward the Loup River, and any ditches dug to compensate for the character of the land would become dangerously deep within a few blocks. Voters also found out that the bonds would cost them fifteen cents for each one thousand dollars of assessed property that they possessed each year until they were paid off.<sup>91</sup> The bond issue was defeated in the special election. A two-thirds majority was required for the bonds to pass, and only the Fourth Ward, which had the largest problem with standing water, had a majority voting for the bonds.<sup>92</sup>

The sewer system was in critical condition by 1910. The Loup River's main channel had shifted about half a mile since the system's mains had begun emptying into it. City officials believed that the shift was chiefly due to people who lived along the river putting gates and other structures into the Loup River, a process called "rip-rapping," to alter the river's channel to keep their property from washing away. Using the river bank as a dumping ground contributed to this effect.<sup>93</sup> The city planned to put up a fence on North and Quincy streets to keep people from dumping their refuse into the sewer channels. The Council decided that the sewer companies had never completed the system since it did not

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<sup>91</sup>Ibid., October 16, 1908, p.8. More recent topographic evidence suggests that rather than the portion of the town that was farther from the river being at a lower elevation than the portion closer to the river, the area that Columbus occupied at the turn of the century was flat except for a minor artificially created rise for the railroad tracks. Department of the Interior, *15 Minute Map Columbus, Nebr.*, 1958.

<sup>92</sup>*Telegram*, October 23, 1908, p.5.

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., August 5, 1910, p.1.

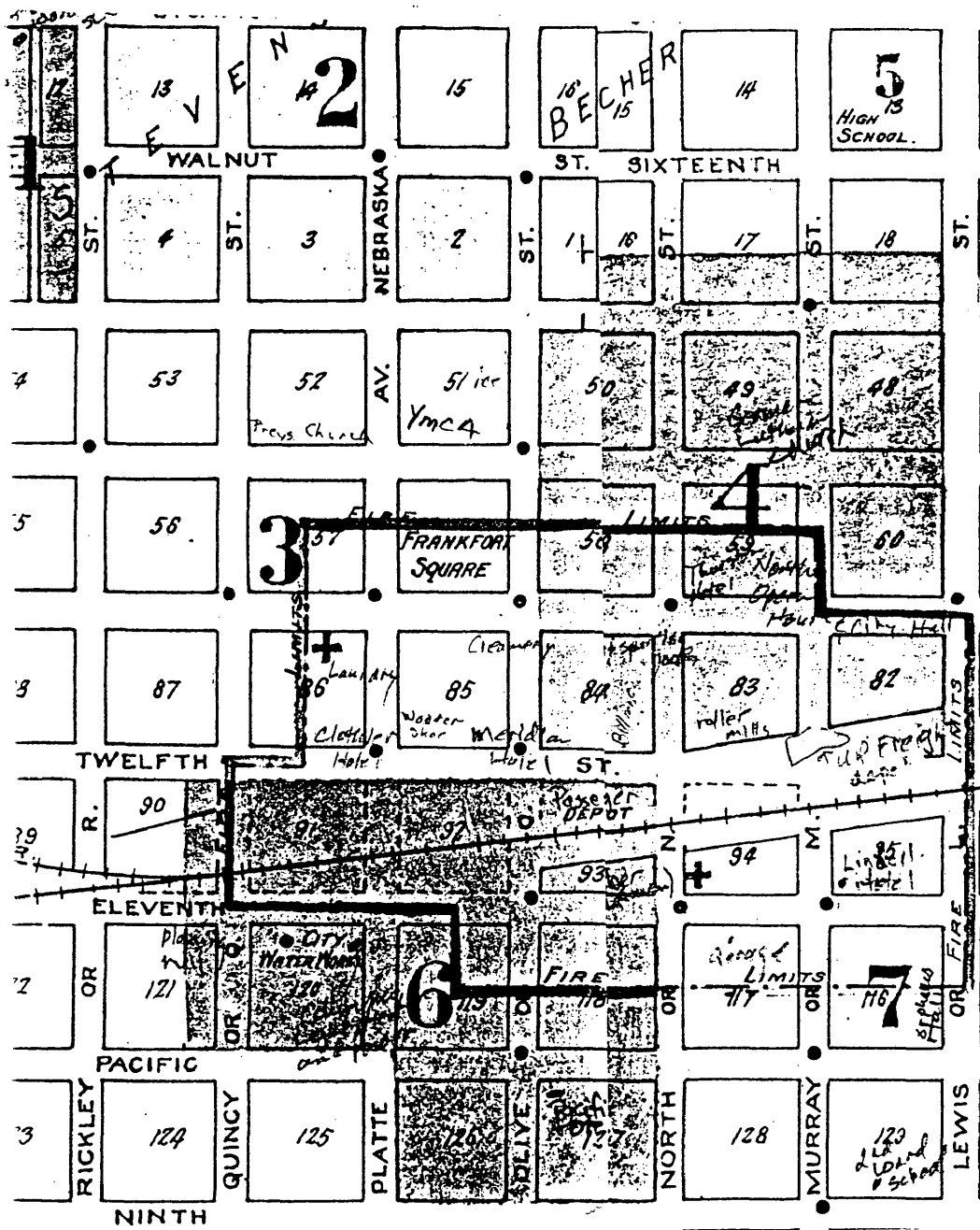
empty into the main channel of the Loup River, but into a small outlet about half a mile from the river. The Council demanded that each of the companies give the city two thousand dollars bond against possible damage from this situation. The sewer companies claimed that the channel shift was a natural phenomenon and they were not responsible for any damage caused by changing drainage capabilities due to the shift.<sup>94</sup> Columbus had to cope with the existing sewer system until 1914, when an underground storm sewer system was built.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup>Ibid., August 26, 1910, p.7.

<sup>95</sup>Phillips, *Past and Present of Platte County*, p.273.

Detail of Columbus City Map showing the intersections claimed by both the City of Columbus and the Union Pacific Railroad Company. (Figure 5.1)<sup>96</sup>



<sup>96</sup>Sanborn Map Company, Columbus, Platte County, Nebraska (New York: Sanborn Map Company, 1909)

# The Bridges of Platte County

## Chapter 6

Unlike most county seats, Columbus is located in the southeastern part of the county, rather than near the center. Before automobiles and good roads were common, this was inconvenient for people in the northwestern part of the county, but its unusual location expanded Columbus's trading sphere to include parts of Polk, Butler, and Colfax counties. Farmers living near the county lines often preferred to transport their produce to Columbus for higher prices than to the smaller communities within their home county, even if it meant a slightly longer trip. The bridges over the Loup and Platte Rivers were essential for maintaining a cost-effective route between Columbus and the counties south of the Platte River.

Keeping the Loup River wagon bridge in good condition was a minor issue for the city of Columbus and Platte County. Because both banks of the river lay within Platte County, allocation of funds from the city or county road and bridge fund was usually enough to keep the Loup River bridge in good repair, and most Columbus residents accepted the inconvenience of repairs without complaint. What disturbed most local people was the way the Loup River was rapidly washing away the southern part of town due to the northward shift of the river's main channel. Local opinions were divided into two main camps. One

contended that the shift was a natural phenomenon, and the other insisted that it was caused by Columbus and other towns dumping their refuse into the river. By 1903, the channel had shifted so far north that engineers were reconsidering the site of a proposed steel bridge, and several lots in the southern part of town were at least partially covered by river water.<sup>1</sup> In 1904, the Platte and Loup River channel currents had covered fifty acres of land in southern Columbus. The *Telegram* voiced the concerns of south-side residents and called on the city and the county to do something to control the rivers' channels before they ate more of the town.<sup>2</sup>

To slow or prevent the Loup River channel's northward movement, the city tried several solutions. The two methods that seemed to get the best results were "fascines" and "rip-rapping." Fascines were long bundles of wood that looked like half-submerged roofs when they were anchored in the river where engineers wanted sandbars to form. If the fascines were well-placed, sandbars would begin forming within days.<sup>3</sup> Rip-rapping was a similar technique. Stone and other material were dumped onto the riverbank to prevent erosion and extended into the water to change the river's course and possibly reclaim land. Judge W.N. Hensley, Columbus's resident inventor, found an efficient, economical

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<sup>1</sup>*Columbus Weekly Telegram*, April 24, 1903, p.1. and July 17, 1903, p.1.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, June 17, 1904, p.1.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, August 19, 1904, p.5.

way to rip-rap in 1907. Instead of using perishable wood or scarce stone, Hensley built a wire fence into the Loup River. When he checked on it two days later, the river had changed its course around the fence, and a sandbar had begun to form.<sup>4</sup>

Despite everyone's best efforts, the Loup River channel shifted ninety feet north during 1904. Lewis Street was less than twenty feet from the waterline, and property owners' demands to the city were getting more insistent.<sup>5</sup> People living near the river were willing to protect their land from anyone or anything that tried to remove it. A group of Polish people attacked contractor Joe Kush when he attempted to take dirt from the Loup River bank near the end of Murray Street to use to raise the level of some residential lots elsewhere. The attackers claimed that the river washed away land faster than they could break it, and they wanted to get as much use out of it as they could before they were forced to move.<sup>6</sup> In response to the attack and complaints by other residents, the City Council passed a resolution prohibiting removal of dirt from lots close to the river to minimize the threat to homes and businesses located there.<sup>7</sup>

By 1907, the Loup River had washed away so much of the original town

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., April 26, 1907, p.5.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., February 24, 1905, p.1.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., March 31, 1905, p.5.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., July 28, 1905, p.1.



site that the Platte County Board of Supervisors instructed the County Treasurer to cancel taxes on forty-five lots, a one-acre tract of land, and two outlets that no longer existed.<sup>8</sup> The Columbus Commercial Club was looking for a way to stop the Loup River from digging a dangerous channel through Barnum Creek.<sup>9</sup> (See Figure 1.4, p. 38) In 1908, the Platte County Board authorized construction of an eighty foot-long dam near Looking Glass Creek, which they hoped would prevent the Loup from cutting a channel through the creek and J.E. North's farm.<sup>10</sup> The county and city governments responded to pleas from people who owned or leased property near the Loup River by jointly engaging in an intense period of rip-rapping that lasted from 1907 through 1909. The action drastically slowed the erosion process, and the remains of some of the material used in the rip-rapping process can still be found under a few feet of sand along the riverbank in the late twentieth century.

Ice and flooding severely damaged the Platte River wagon bridge in 1902, 1904, and 1907. The bridge lay along what later became U.S. Highway 81. Its northern terminus was in Platte County, and the southern terminus was on the border of Polk and Butler counties. Until 1907, when all repairs to the bridge were made with wood, all three county governments had informally agreed to

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., August 16, 1907, p.5.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., February 22, 1907, p.1.

<sup>10</sup>*Telegram*, July 10, 1908, p.1.

divide repair costs into three equal portions. When faced with the cost of completely replacing the bridge, however, the three county governments could not immediately agree whether to repair the old wooden bridge or to build a new steel one, and the rivalries among the counties played themselves out in a long series of futile negotiations over each county's share of the expenses for work on the bridge. (See Figure 6.1, p. 163)

An arch rotted through in late June, 1907, causing the floor of the bridge to sink further each time a heavy load crossed. Platte County Supervisor Louis Schwartz ordered immediate repairs so people living south of the Platte River could safely cross the bridge to attend the Fourth of July festivities in Columbus.<sup>11</sup> After the holiday celebration, the Platte County Board ordered a more detailed inspection of the bridge, and the inspectors found that the entire structure was in such an advanced state of decay that the bridge had to be condemned immediately and signs posted to release the three counties from legal liability for accidents that might occur due to the poor condition of the bridge.<sup>12</sup>

Representatives from Butler, Platte, and Polk counties met in David City to discuss their options for repairing or replacing the Platte River wagon bridge. The representatives from Polk and Platte counties agreed that repair or replacement had to take place as soon as possible, but the Butler County

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., July 5, 1907, p.1.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., July 12, 1907, p.6.

representatives were indifferent. Their only commitment to the issue was a promise to discuss it at their next County Board meeting.<sup>13</sup> Two weeks later, the bridge was formally condemned, warning signs were posted, and Platte County officials were waiting to hear Polk and Butler counties' preferences about whether to repair or replace the existing bridge.<sup>14</sup>

Butler and Polk counties eventually sent word that they preferred to repair the old bridge at a total cost of forty-five hundred dollars rather than construct a new bridge.<sup>15</sup> Platte County stressed that the repairs would be temporary and continued to try to persuade the other two counties to approve the construction of a new steel bridge.<sup>16</sup> Butler and Polk County officials remained unenthusiastic about paying for a new bridge and reimbursing Platte County for the latest repairs on the old one. The *Telegram* reminded Platte County residents to appreciate everything that Supervisor Schwartz was doing to keep the bridge traversable until the other two counties decided to give the bridge the attention it required.<sup>17</sup>

Representatives from Platte and Polk counties met in Columbus on October 31, 1907 to officially settle the issue of division of payment for repairs and

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p.1.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., July 26, 1907, p.1.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., August 16, 1907, p.5.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., August 23, 1907, p.1.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 1907, p.5.

potential new construction. The Polk County representatives insisted that their county's fair share of the cost was one-fourth of the total, rather than one-third. They reasoned that since Polk County maintained half of the southern half of the bridge, its fair share of the cost of maintenance was one-fourth of the total rather than dividing the cost equally among the three counties. Rather than engage in lengthy, expensive litigation, Platte County agreed to Polk County's division of the cost of bridge repair and construction. Butler County remained passive on the issue, but Platte County officials thought that they would pay a bill for one-fourth of the cost of repair or construction of a new bridge if it was handed to them.<sup>18</sup> Part of Butler County's reluctance to commit to the Platte River bridge project was its entanglement in litigation with Colfax County over payment for repair on a shared bridge.<sup>19</sup>

As the ice was melting in the spring of 1908, Butler County still refused to contribute any funds toward a new bridge, and Polk County still insisted that it would only pay for one-fourth of the cost. The old bridge's condition continued to deteriorate while the Platte County Supervisors discussed ways to collect Butler County's portion of the cost of a new bridge.<sup>20</sup> Frustrated by the lack of action, and concerned about the bridge's condition, the Columbus

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., November 1, 1907, p.5.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., December 13, 1907, p.1.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., March 27, 1908, p.1.

Commercial Club threatened to file an action with the Nebraska Supreme Court that would require the three counties to replace the Platte River bridge.<sup>21</sup>

Complaints about the bridge's condition continued. The office of the Fourth Assistant Postmaster General informed the Platte County Board that service for Rural Route Five from Columbus would be suspended if the bridge were not repaired immediately.<sup>22</sup> Emergency repairs were made to keep the bridge traversable until the three counties could agree on a course of action.<sup>23</sup> The ever-helpful *Telegram* offered a suggestion to the county governments. It recommended that they follow the example of the railroad companies which cut costs in any possible way. When building a bridge, the railroad companies first narrowed the river's channel so the bridge span would not be so long. Since diking was cheaper than bridging, the process cut costs and had the added benefits of keeping the river channel under greater control and almost eliminating ice jams and over flows by keeping the channel narrow and deep.<sup>24</sup>

Butler County representatives did not show up for an August 13, 1908 meeting at the bridge's south end to discuss its condition. Polk County representatives suggested that the best course of action would be for Platte County

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., April 17, 1908, p.1.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., June 26, 1908, p.1.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., August 7, 1908, p.1.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., May 22, 1908, p.1.

to build the bridge and then sue the other two counties for their shares of the expenses. This way, a court of law would determine each county's portion of the financial responsibility for the bridge.<sup>25</sup>

After the meeting, Platte County decided to implement its plan to replace the Platte River bridge. The Board of Supervisors planned to raise half of the total cost of the bridge and guarantee the rest as credit with the selected bridge company. To raise twenty-five thousand dollars, the Board planned to apportion six thousand dollars from the road and bridge funds of the city of Columbus and Columbus Township, get Columbus voters to approve ten thousand dollars worth of bonds, and ask for donations to cover the remaining nine thousand dollars. Board members planned to wait for feedback from Platte County residents and make a final decision at their next session.<sup>26</sup>

As the Platte County Board deliberated over the methods of payment, prominent farmers from northwest Butler County began circulating a petition to prod the Butler County Board into actively supporting the construction of a new bridge. The Platte County Board was forced to make emergency repairs to the bridge in October and hoped that it would survive the winter. No one had any hope that the bridge would survive if it received even its normal amount of

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., August 14, 1908, p.5.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., August 21, 1908, p.1.

damage during the next ice break-up.<sup>27</sup> The Board approved apportionment of twelve thousand dollars for additional repairs to the bridge in January 1909.<sup>28</sup>

The Board's pace was still not fast enough for the Commercial Club. In late January, it formed a committee to look into the probable cost of a new steel bridge over the Platte River, Platte County's share of the expenses, and the Columbus residents' probable reaction to a bond election.<sup>29</sup> Reports about the conditions of the bridge and the river fed the Club's urgency. W.D. Benson, who took daily measurements of the river for the government, said that the Platte River had frozen over when the water was at an unusually high level, and if the ice broke up quickly, the old wooden bridge was almost certainly doomed because the river would not be able to move the ice quickly enough to prevent an ice jam.<sup>30</sup>

After three weeks of research, the Commercial Club's bridge committee recommended a bridge with a sixteen foot wide roadway and a span of eighty to one hundred feet supported by steel caissons which would cost approximately forty-five thousand dollars. The committee suggested that Platte County should pay for the bridge by apportioning ten thousand dollars from the county road and

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., October 9, 1908, p.1.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., January 15, 1909, p.1.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., February 5, 1909, p.1.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p.5.

bridge fund, issuing thirty thousand dollars of bonds through the city of Columbus, and five thousand dollars of bonds through Columbus Township. Allowances for awarding contracts and for legal proceedings against Polk and Butler Counties were included in the committee's estimated cost of the bridge. The committee recommended that all revenue from the sale of lumber from the old bridge should go to the treasuries of Platte County, Columbus Township, and the city of Columbus.<sup>31</sup>

Defying all odds and predictions, the old wooden Platte River wagon bridge was not completely destroyed during the 1909 ice breakup. A few spans had been damaged, but signs announcing that the bridge was unsafe for travel were quickly posted and repair was due to begin soon.<sup>32</sup>

Plans for the bond election in Columbus fell through. The city had originally planned to put the bond issue on the spring ballot, then planned to hold a special election at a later date,<sup>33</sup> until it learned that there was no legal way to collect money for the bridge from Butler and Polk counties unless they also voted bonds. So, the special bond election and bridge construction were delayed indefinitely while the City Council and the Commercial Club sought other

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., February 26, 1909, p.1.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., March 5, 1909, p.1.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.



means of raising Columbus's portion of the bridge money.<sup>34</sup>

A safe bridge over the Platte River was needed desperately. In 1909, two fishermen presented the *Telegram* with an informal count of traffic over the Loup and Platte River bridges. In one hour and forty minutes, they had counted two hundred vehicles crossing the bridges, and most of them were returning to Butler or Polk County. The fishermen did not specify how much of the traffic was composed of automobiles. The *Telegram* pointed out that the absence of a bridge over the Platte River in the current location could jeopardize Columbus's business interests.<sup>35</sup>

Members of the Columbus Commercial Club met with farmers from Polk and Butler counties in early May, 1909. The Polk County farmers had invested heavily into a bridge near Duncan about six miles from Columbus a few months earlier, and were hesitant to invest in another bridge project until they determined how well the Duncan bridge served them as a route to Columbus.<sup>36</sup> Farmers from Alexis Township in Butler County who met with the Columbus Commercial Club representatives were willing to bond the township for five thousand dollars as a contribution to the Platte River bridge project. To them, paying an extra two cents per acre of land each year was insignificant compared to maintaining

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., April 9, 1909, p.1.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., April 23, 1909, p.1.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., May 7, 1909, p.1.

their easy access to Columbus as a market town. They promised to hold a special bond election in Alexis Township as soon as possible, but they did not think that the Butler County government would voluntarily contribute to the cost of the bridge.<sup>37</sup> Much to the farmers' surprise, the bond issue was defeated in Alexis Township. Other landowners were afraid that if the township provided financial support for the bridge's construction, the township, rather than Butler County, would be held financially responsible for its maintenance. However, most of the landowners were enthusiastic about the idea of a new steel bridge and claimed that they were willing to contribute generously to a private bridge fund.<sup>38</sup>

The Platte County Board of Supervisors awarded the contract for extensive repairs to the old bridge to the Standard Bridge Company in early October, 1909. The supports that were in the worst condition were to be replaced with steel, and estimates for the cost of the work ranged from six to seven thousand dollars. Polk County had "virtually promised" to pay for one-fourth of the cost, and Butler County had promised nothing.<sup>39</sup> Material for the project arrived shortly after the first of the year, and the County Board announced that the bridge would have to be completely closed to traffic for portions of the construction, but assured people that a county supervisor would be overseeing the project to ensure

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., May 21, 1909, p.1.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., June 4, 1909, p.1.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., October 8, 1909, p.1.

that it was completed as quickly as possible.<sup>40</sup> As work progressed the bridge crew built temporary approaches to the bridge, and allowed crossings when traffic would not interfere with work. The bridge was completely opened to traffic before eight in the morning and after five in the evening.

As the work progressed, Polk and Butler counties expressed their willingness to pay for their shares of the work without legal action. The Platte County Attorney assured the Platte County Supervisors that if they changed their minds, sufficient legal precedent existed to ensure that they would be forced to pay.<sup>41</sup>

John Burke, the mail carrier for Rural Route Five, suggested that the Commercial Club or city or county governments should ask the War Department for the use of a pontoon bridge to allow unrestricted movement across the Platte River.<sup>42</sup> J.S. Haney, a Columbus business owner, took Burke's advice and wrote to Congressman James Latta requesting a pontoon bridge for the Platte River for the summer of 1910. Latta evidently responded without talking to anyone of authority within the War Department. He assured Haney that if there was a pontoon bridge at Fort Crook, the War Department would probably let Columbus

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., January 21, 1910, p.1.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., March 4, 1910, p.1.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., April 1, 1910, p.1.

borrow one.<sup>43</sup> The War Department soon denied the request because shipping the bridge, and assigning personnel to set it up, maintain, and guard it would interfere with regular maneuvers. It would also have cost Columbus and Platte County five thousand dollars.<sup>44</sup>

The Platte County board opened bids for construction of a new bridge over the Platte River in April, 1910, and retained Columbus City Attorney Louis Lightner to assist the county attorney with any legal proceedings against Butler and Polk counties.<sup>45</sup> Both of the other counties had refused to send representatives to a meeting to discuss the new bridge. Polk County continued to claim that it would not actively promote the project, but would pay a bill for one-fourth of the total cost without complaint. Butler County remained silent on the issue.<sup>46</sup>

Special bond elections for the city of Columbus and Columbus Township were scheduled for April, 1910. As the election approached, many people remained reluctant to vote in favor of the bonds for fear of the effect on their taxes, so the county treasurer worked out some examples of how much most people could expect their taxes to increase. Taxes for the township would

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., May 13, 1910, p.1.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., June 17, 1910, p.5.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., April 15, 1910, p.3.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p.4.

increase by about six cents per one thousand dollars of valuation, or by forty-five cents for each one hundred fifty acres of land. Within the city, the tax increase would be twenty-six cents per one thousand dollars of valuation. County officials reminded people that when Butler and Polk counties paid their shares of the bridge expenses, Platte County's burden would be halved. They also advised people to consider whether a slight tax increase was worth losing business from farmers living south of the Platte River and Rural Route Five to Duncan, because without a bridge near Columbus, the closest river crossing was the new bridge near Duncan.<sup>47</sup>

The bridge bonds passed by large majorities in both the township and the city, chiefly due to a vigorous campaign by prominent boosters. The County Treasurer's explanation of the tax increase had helped allay people's fears, but the township bonds got the necessary two-thirds majority only because several bridge promoters realized that people who lived in the parts of the township that were farthest from the bridge were unlikely to make a special trip of twelve to fifteen miles into town just to cast a vote in favor of bonds that would increase their taxes, however insignificantly. Some of the promoters who owned automobiles took ballots to people living in the remote corners of the township. When the results were tabulated, the project supporters were surprised that most of the negative votes had not come from the areas of the township where people would

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., April 22, 1910, p.1.

get the least direct benefit from the bridge, but from the second ward of Columbus.<sup>48</sup>

Figure 6.2

	Votes For the Bonds	%	Votes Against the Bonds	%
Township	192	86%	32	14%
City	881	92%	74	8%
1st Ward	215	90%	23	10%
2nd Ward	181	85%	33	15%
3rd Ward	256	96%	11	4%
4th Ward	229	97%	7	3%
Totals	1073	91%	106	9%

The Standard Bridge Company's contract for building the new Platte River wagon bridge stipulated that the project had to be completed by the end of November, three months from the date of the contract.<sup>49</sup> By June 10, the project foreman had finished surveying, staked out the bridge location, and ordered several freight car loads of lumber and steel. He claimed that the crew could finish the job in half of the allotted time if Platte County would promptly purchase supplies.<sup>50</sup> Lack of cash would eventually slow the project's progress, but the initial phases were accomplished quickly despite minor setbacks when some shipments did not arrive on time.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., April 29, 1910, p.1.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., May 27, 1910, p.1.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., June 10, 1910, p.1.

Two Chicago firms offered to purchase the twenty-five thousand dollars worth of Columbus's remaining bridge bonds, but the City Council initially refused the offers because neither met the par value of the bonds.<sup>51</sup> The city bonds continued to have a slow rate of sale due to the sluggish bond market, and the city was soon forced to accept an offer from one of the Chicago firms. The C.H. Coffin firm had offered \$23,351 for the bonds, but did not have a draft to pay for them, so City Attorney Lightner asked the State Treasury to buy the Columbus bonds and then have the Chicago firm buy an equal amount of Douglas County bonds, which evidently did not require a draft. The State Treasurer insisted upon getting the Douglas County Board's approval before undertaking the transaction.<sup>52</sup> The Douglas County Board approved the deal, and the Omaha National Bank issued a twenty-three thousand dollar draft to Columbus City Treasurer Walter Boettcher for the bridge bonds.<sup>53</sup>

Platte and Butler counties went to court in September over payment for the previous winter's repairs to the old bridge, but Butler County tried to get the case dismissed because of the construction of the new bridge. Polk County announced that the outcome of this case would determine whether it would pay

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., July 9, 1910, p.7.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., July 15, 1910, p.1 and July 29, 1910, p.1.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., August 5, 1910, p.1.

its share.<sup>54</sup>

The new bridge was completed before the end of October, 1910. It was made of iron and steel except for the floor, which was made of wood, and its final cost was \$37,117.56. Polk and Butler County officials had been invited to the bridge opening ceremony, but did not show up or send their regrets.<sup>55</sup>

In the meantime, construction of the bridge over the Platte River near Duncan became a major reason for Polk County's ambivalent attitude toward the bridge at Columbus. The Duncan bridge came about because farmers in the area wanted easier access to Columbus, and the St. Stanislaus Church Corporation which was about one mile from the Platte River and the northwestern portion of Polk County, wanted parishioners to have a safer route to the church and school than the railroad bridge or fording the river, and closer than using the bridge at Columbus. The two interest groups convinced the Duncan Elevator Company to pledge one thousand dollars toward the project, and got a promise from the Union Pacific Company to help defray the costs to Platte and Polk counties. They planned to discuss the issue at the February 25, 1908 meeting of the Platte County Board's Committee on Roads and Bridges.<sup>56</sup>

By March, the people of Duncan had already raised thirty-seven hundred

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., September 2, 1910, p.1.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., October 28, 1910, p.1.

<sup>56</sup>Telegram, January 21, 1908, p.1.



dollars to donate toward Platte County's share of the expenses, which were more than Polk County's because Platte County had to build a road to meet the bridge. The Platte County Board referred the promised contribution to its Committee on Roads and Bridges, and agreed to send representatives to an April 7 meeting in Osceola, the Polk County seat, for further discussion.<sup>57</sup>

Farmers living near Duncan on both sides of the Platte River quickly became frustrated with the counties' slow pace of discussion and planning. By the beginning of April, they were trying to privately subscribe half of the stock needed to pay for a fifty thousand dollar toll bridge, and had persuaded the Standard Bridge Company to take the other half of the stock as payment.<sup>58</sup> One month later, the farmers were just one thousand dollars short of the money they needed for their share of the cost of the bridge. Once the last thousand dollars were collected, the bridge company promised to start work.<sup>59</sup>

The private deal did not go through, but a year later Polk County expressed interest in assisting with financing the bridge.<sup>60</sup> The Duncan bridge was once again a "virtual certainty," only on a much smaller scale. The cost of the proposed bridge was estimated at fourteen thousand dollars. Platte County

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., March 13, 1908, p.5.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., April 3, 1908, p.5.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., May 8, 1908, p.1.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., April 2, 1909, p.1.

planned to pay fifteen hundred dollars for the construction and to maintain half of the bridge thereafter. Polk County and private donations would pay for the balance of the construction.<sup>61</sup>

The Nebraska Construction Company won the bid for building the bridge at Duncan in September, 1909. Several private donations from residents and businesses augmented Platte County's official contribution to the bridge which was completed before the end of the year. Polk County adopted a more genial attitude toward the bridge at Columbus, and representatives from both county boards planned to meet early in October 1909.<sup>62</sup> At that meeting, the Polk County representatives told their counterparts from Platte County that their county government would "probably" promptly pay for its share of a new bridge near Columbus, and the Platte County representatives could not get a more concrete promise from them.

People who depended upon safe bridges often became victims of the rivalries, tension, and inefficiency among county and municipal governments. As governing bodies determined jurisdiction and courses of action, bridges became unsafe and the rivers carried away land. The struggle to secure enough money to fund bridge construction and the arguments over how much financial responsibility belonged to each city or county government would be alleviated by funds such as

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., June 29, 1909, p.5.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., September 17, 1909, p.1.

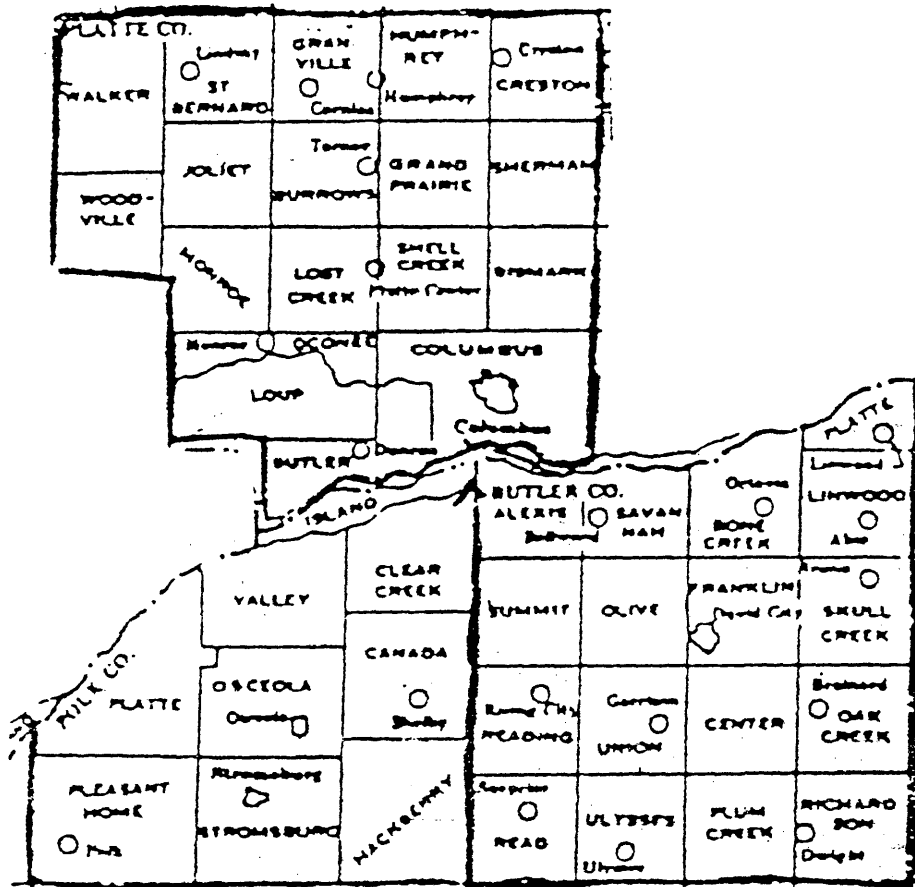
the State Aid Bridge Act of 1911, but jurisdictional disputes among Butler, Polk, and Platte counties have continued into 1999.<sup>63</sup> The Platte River has changed course, migrating northward about one and a half miles, which has created confusion over which county has responsibility for law enforcement along the river--a situation which criminals have readily exploited.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 299.

<sup>64</sup>Todd Von Kampen, "Platte River Counties Wage Border War," *Omaha World-Herald*, April 7, 1999, evening edition, pp. 17 and 20.

Map of Platte, Butler, and Polk counties (Figure 6.1)<sup>64</sup>



<sup>64</sup>John L. Andriott, ed., *Township Atlas of the United States* (McLean, Virginia: Andriott Associates, 1979), pp. 390-391.

# Postal Service

## Chapter 7

Free postal delivery marked an important milestone in a town's development. Qualifying for free delivery meant that a town had a thriving economy which had attracted a substantial population. Columbus entered the twentieth century without free delivery service within the city limits. Its third class post office occupied a building the government leased from a local owner, and its gross receipts totaled \$7,889.71, thirty-three percent of which went to pay operating expenses.<sup>1</sup> Postmaster Carl Kramer had been commissioned on June 15, 1897, and would continue to serve in that position throughout the first decade of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> In 1900, he received an annual salary of nineteen hundred dollars, and his clerk received three hundred dollars per year.<sup>3</sup> By the end of the next fiscal year, the Columbus Post Office had attained gross receipts of \$8,902.16, and had been reclassified as a second class post office. Kramer's

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<sup>1</sup>House of Representatives, *Report of the Auditor for the Post Office Department to the Postmaster General for the Fiscal Year ended June 30, 1900* ( Washington: GPO, 1900), p. 939.

<sup>2</sup>Margaret Curry, *The History of Platte County, Nebraska* (Culver City, California: Murray and Gek, 1950), p.48.

<sup>3</sup>House of Representatives, *Report of the Auditor for the Post Office Department for the Year Ended June 30, 1900* (Washington: GPO, 1900), p. 939.

salary had increased to two thousand dollars per year, and he had more clerks.<sup>4</sup>

However, the town still did not qualify for free delivery.

At the Columbus Commercial Club's request, Congressman J.S. Robinson introduced a bill to allocate seventy-five thousand dollars to purchase a site and construction materials for a federal building in Columbus.<sup>5</sup> As Congress debated the issue, a postal inspector ordered Postmaster Kramer to find a larger building because the current structure became hazardously crowded when several people came to pick up their mail at the same time. Kramer's task was complicated because there were not any unoccupied buildings in town that were larger than his present location.<sup>6</sup> To further confuse the issue, the Columbus Post Office's gross receipts for fiscal year 1901 to 1902 totaled \$9,852.85, which qualified the town for free delivery.<sup>7</sup> The service was scheduled to start "sometime" after July 1, 1902, and the *Telegram* reminded people that they would have to display numbers on their houses and businesses since carriers would not deliver mail to unmarked buildings.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>House of Representatives, *Report of the Auditor for the Post Office Department to the Secretary of the Treasury and to the Postmaster General for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1901* (Washington: GPO, 1901), p.1038; and *Telegram*, April 19, 1901, p.1.

<sup>5</sup>*Columbus Weekly Telegram*, February 7, 1902, p.1.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, April 11, 1902, p.1.

<sup>7</sup>House of Representatives, *Report of the Auditor for the Post Office Department to the Secretary of the Treasury and to the Postmaster General for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1902* (Washington: GPO, 1902), p.770.

<sup>8</sup>*Telegram*, May 16, 1902, p.1.

Meanwhile, Postmaster Kramer was looking at prospective sites for a new post office. By July, 1902, he had narrowed the possibilities down to two locations: the “Gray” site and the “Echols” site. A rift in the local Republican party became more pronounced as supporters of the rival lots promoted their sites to the Post Office Department.<sup>9</sup> Unable to resolve the situation themselves, representatives from both sides took the conflict to Senator Joseph Millard.<sup>10</sup> Millard’s private secretary, James B. Haynes, arrived in Columbus on July 30 to inspect both sites and to hear the arguments of both factions. He refused to speculate what Millard’s decision would be, but he promised that the Senator would give them an answer within two weeks.<sup>11</sup> Three weeks later, Millard chose the Echols site, which turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory for the owner. The government had specific guidelines for furnishing the proposed building, which required Echols to purchase some expensive furniture and equipment. The *Telegram* claimed that “everyone” thought that having a modern, comfortable Post Office was worth the expense.<sup>12</sup> The Columbus Post Office moved to its new location in the Echols building, across from Frankfort Park, on October 14, 1902

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., July 18, 1902, p.1.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., July 25, 1902, p.1.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., August 1, 1902, p.1.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., August 22, 1902, p.1.

with minimal disruption of service.<sup>13</sup>

Free delivery service was indefinitely delayed, supposedly because so few buildings in town were numbered. Robert Welch, a wealthy businessman who had emigrated from England, approached the City Council in September, 1902 to remind it that numbering of buildings was not merely a requirement for postal delivery, but a city ordinance that had been on the books since 1890. The Council gave the issue to the Streets and Grades Committee.<sup>14</sup> Later in September, the Council announced that according to the ordinance which had gone into effect on January 1, 1890, all residences and businesses had to display numbers.<sup>15</sup> To meet further requirements for free delivery, the City Clerk began taking bids for creating street signs.<sup>16</sup>

The Columbus Post Office and its employees did reap some benefits from the increased business. In 1903, the office received machines for canceling stamps and letters. The machines helped speed up the workflow, but were manually powered rather than electric because Columbus's electric power plant did not operate during daylight hours.<sup>17</sup> The two existing clerks got raises, and

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., October 17, 1902, p.5.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., September 12, 1902, p.5.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., September 26, 1902, p.8.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., January 23, 1903, p.1 and May 29, 1903, p.5.



Columbus was eligible for a third clerk.<sup>18</sup>

Postal receipts for the first quarter of 1903 were the largest Columbus had ever handled. By the end of fiscal year 1903, postal receipts had again exceeded the requirement for free delivery, and Postmaster Kramer promised to start the service as soon as possible, making a formal request in December for permission to hire carriers and start the service.<sup>19</sup>

Increasing mail volume and Kramer's formal request did not hasten the introduction of free delivery to Columbus since house and street markings still did not meet the Post Office's standards. In 1905, after Columbus had met the annual receipt requirement for three consecutive years and convinced most people to number their homes and businesses, the Post Office sent Inspector H.A. Moore from Kansas City to decide if Columbus met all the criteria for free delivery. Moore found that some buildings remained unnumbered, and that only alternate street corners had street signs, and that many of Columbus's sidewalks were in poor condition. He also suggested improving the street lighting.<sup>20</sup>

The City Council was soon able to convince the Post Office that it was taking measures to meet the requirements for free delivery, and the Post Office granted Postmaster Kramer permission to start the service on May 1, 1905. The

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., March 20, 1903, p.1.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., July 3, 1903, p.1 and December 4, 1903, p.1.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., January 6, 1905, p.5.

city planned to put signs on all of its street corners, as required by the Post Office, and put pressure on people to number their houses and businesses, and to build safe sidewalks. A few residential areas did not have any sidewalks, and would not have their mail delivered until residents built adequate walks. To encourage people to number their homes, Gray's Mercantile began selling house numbers and offered a service to let people know their residence and business numbers.<sup>21</sup>

Mail delivery service meant that fewer people would need post office boxes, so Postmaster Kramer planned to remodel the post office interior by eliminating most of the boxes and adding service windows for dispensing stamps and money orders.<sup>22</sup> Carriers for town delivery were selected in April, and more remodeling was done to the interior of the post office to accommodate a carriers' window.<sup>23</sup>

Free delivery began in Columbus on May 1, 1905. Postal customers were warned that there would not be any mail delivery on Sundays, but they could pick up their Sunday mail at the carriers' window in the post office between noon and one PM. Service for Monday through Saturday included two residential and three business deliveries each day. People could mail letters from any of the

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., March 10, 1905, p.5.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., March 3, 1905, p.1.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., April 14, 1905, p.1.

drop boxes around town, but were advised that first class mail required a two cent stamp.<sup>24</sup> The first week of delivery went smoothly, although the carriers did not have uniforms due to a teamster's strike in Chicago.<sup>25</sup>

Changes in shipping procedures and train schedules could affect the timely arrival of mail. On January 1, 1904, Columbus people found out that beginning that day, their evening mail would come from Omaha on Union Pacific passenger train number five, which arrived at 6:10 PM, one hour earlier than the previous evening mail train. Most people did not mind the change since a large percentage of the mail that arrived from the east came via Omaha. The new shipping schedule would slow service from other points in the east.<sup>26</sup>

As the end of Postmaster Carl Kramer's term approached, Republican factionalism entered into the selection of possible candidates for his position. Kramer's political rivals pointed out that his eligibility as a candidate was questionable since President Theodore Roosevelt had declared a two-term limit on many appointed posts, and Kramer had already served for two terms. George Fairchild and J.D. Stires were suggested as alternate Republican candidates.<sup>27</sup> Roosevelt's decree did not force Kramer out of his position. He was reappointed

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<sup>24</sup>First class mail was defined as any paper on which there was lettering. *Telegram*, April 28, 1905, p.5.

<sup>25</sup>*Telegram*, May 5, 1905, p.1.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, January 1, 1904, p.1.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, December 23, 1904, p.1.

for his third four-year term in 1906.<sup>28</sup>

Early in 1907, the residential areas that had not had sidewalks when free delivery began claimed that their sidewalks now met the requirements for the service, and asked for it to be extended into their areas.<sup>29</sup> Residents thought that the affected area was large enough to justify starting a fourth route, so a postal inspector came to Columbus on May 4 to determine the accuracy of their claims of good sidewalks, numbered houses, adequate lighting, and a population that was large enough to justify a fourth carrier for Columbus.<sup>30</sup> The inspector did not approve the route, because the area did not have enough good sidewalks, and many houses remained unnumbered, but later that year, the Post Office Department granted Postmaster Kramer's request for another clerk.<sup>31</sup>

Over the next year, residents of the northwestern part of town improved their sidewalks, and encouraged their neighbors to number their houses. They made enough progress to justify a second inspection. With a postal inspector scheduled to visit Columbus in late January, 1908, the *Telegram* made a final plea to people who lived in unnumbered houses.<sup>32</sup> The inspector approved the

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., January 19, 1906, p.1.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., February 8, 1907, p.1.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., May 10, 1907, p.1.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., September 26, 1907, p.1.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., January 17, 1908, p.1.

new route. City route number four began service on February 15, 1908, for people in the northwestern part of town who had numbers on their houses.<sup>33</sup>

In 1906, Congress apportioned seventy-five hundred dollars for the city of Columbus to use toward a lot for a new post office building.<sup>34</sup> Six months later, the federal government passed a bill that Senator Millard had introduced, apportioning an additional forty-five thousand dollars to Columbus for construction of a post office building. The city was in the process of choosing possible sites for its new post office and accepting bids to construct it, and was waiting impatiently for a government inspector to come to town to view the potential sites.<sup>35</sup> In February, 1907, an inspector chose the lot at the corner of Fourteenth and North Street for Columbus's new post office. The city purchased the lot from former Senator Hugh Hughes for six thousand dollars--fifteen hundred dollars less than the amount that had been appropriated for that purpose.<sup>36</sup>

Before the selection of Hughes' lot became official, the federal government requested more information on another Fourteenth Street site, which caused considerable confusion and a few ego explosions. Senator Millard assured Hughes that his site had already been selected, and claimed not to know anything about

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., February 7, 1908, p.1.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., June 29, 1906, p.1.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., December 14, 1906, p.1.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., February 22, 1907, p.1.

the request for information on the other site. The confusion ended when Hughes got official notice of the selection of his site from the Treasury Department in early March, 1907.<sup>37</sup>

City mail carriers received a one hundred dollar per year raise in 1908, which increased their annual salary to one thousand dollars.<sup>38</sup> Omaha salesmen arrived in town trying to sell a stamp vending and change making machine to the post office.<sup>39</sup> They were not able to sell their machine in Columbus since the electricity plant still did not operate during the day.

Republican factionalism resurfaced in 1909 when John Dawson, a member of the dominant faction, led an attempt to get Kramer dismissed. Postmaster Kramer had sided with the minority faction when the Columbus Republican Party split several years earlier. An inspector arrived in Columbus in July to investigate Dawson's charges that Kramer had been using his position to influence people's political decisions. The inspector refused to speculate before he left whether the charges would be upheld.<sup>40</sup> The charges were dismissed, and Kramer remained Postmaster.

After four years of free mail delivery, several people in Columbus began

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., March 8, 1907, p.1.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., July 3, 1908, p.1.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., July 17, 1908, p.5.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., July 16, 1909, p.1.

to take the service for granted, and became lax about clearing their sidewalks after snowstorms. The Columbus mail carriers began considering complaining to the Post Office Department headquarters in Washington about the condition of some of the sidewalks in town because a few people were leaving their sidewalks drifted shut for more than two days after a heavy snow, and the carriers had to walk through some deep drifts to deliver the mail.<sup>41</sup>

Columbus broke its former record for postal receipts during the last quarter of 1909, handling a total of \$5,479 or the equivalent of 270,000 two cent stamps. Receipts for the entire year totaled \$17,480--an increase of \$7,000 over the four years since free delivery had begun.<sup>42</sup>

At the beginning of 1909, construction of Columbus's new post office had been indefinitely postponed because Congress had scheduled several other projects ahead of it.<sup>43</sup> However, before the end of the year, the *Omaha Bee* ran an article stating that the plans for Columbus's new post office were almost complete, and that the government would probably start awarding contracts before the end of the year.<sup>44</sup> Postmaster Kramer received the plans for the new building in March, 1910. The specifications required that the building was to be

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., November 19, 1909, p.1.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., January 7, 1910, p.1.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., February 26, 1909, p.1.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., November 12, 1909, p.1.

completed before May 1, 1911, so Kramer thought that construction would begin soon.<sup>45</sup> However, all of the bids given during the first round of negotiations for a contractor had exceeded the amount Congress had appropriated for the building by at least thirty-seven hundred dollars. Kramer wrote to Nebraska's senators for advice, and hoped that they would push for the appropriation of more money for the project rather than recommend reduction of the building's size.<sup>46</sup> The senators were unable to secure more money for Columbus's new post office, but Kramer was relieved to see that the modifications to the building plans consisted only of a less expensive exterior material and not reduction of the building's size. The second round of bidding opened on July 11 in Washington D.C.<sup>47</sup> The Bartlett & Klinge construction company of Cedar Rapids, Iowa won the contract with a bid of \$64,180, and began work in July, 1910.<sup>48</sup> That structure was torn down in the 1950s, and replaced by an updated Post Office at a different location, and the site of the 1910 building is now a parking lot and a savings and loan firm.

Before the twentieth century, limited rural mail delivery was accomplished through a haphazardly laid out system of government routes supplemented by "star" routes. More informal means of delivery included sending family members

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., March 18, 1910, p.1.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., April 22, 1910, p.7.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., June 10, 1910, p.1.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., July 15, 1910, p.5.



into town or asking the milkman to bring the mail on his rounds, but most farmers came into town to get their mail.<sup>49</sup> The federal government did not begin to think of the Post Office as a service rather than as a business until the middle of the nineteenth century. After this shift in philosophy, the government reorganized the department so it would be partially supported by the National Treasury, rather than being self-supporting or turning an annual profit.<sup>50</sup>

Rural mail routes were initially created haphazardly in Washington, D.C. without current information about local roads, or whether people along a proposed route wanted mail delivery service. Random creation of rural mail routes ended in 1898, and from then on, farmers who wanted mail delivery service had to send a petition and a description of their community and its road conditions to their congressional representative. After a few years, applicants also had to include a county map indicating the proposed route.<sup>51</sup>

Setting up the rural delivery system was not a simple process. Rural postmasters stridently protested the service since their post offices were often in the same building as their grocery store or mercantile. Free rural delivery meant farmers would make fewer trips into town, so the rural postmaster would suffer

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<sup>49</sup>Wayne E. Fuller, *RFD: The Changing Face of Rural America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), p.9. Star routes were leased to independent carriers without a specific means of conveyance stated in the contract. Such routes were marked by an asterisk on maps.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, p.55.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p.42.

as a store keeper as well as from the loss of the prestige of the title "Postmaster."<sup>52</sup> Prominent local people as well as representatives in Washington, D.C. caused many unnecessary delays for implementation of the new routes by creating many inefficient routes as they attempted to form a route that would be most financially, politically, or egotistically advantageous to themselves.<sup>53</sup> The Post Office Department spent more money and personnel resources and did more paperwork to organize the rural delivery system than it had for all of its other services combined.<sup>54</sup> The majority of rural routes were organized between 1902 and 1905, but organization of new rural routes continued until 1926, reaching a maximum number of 45,315.

In 1901, a group of people living in the rural area around Columbus signed a petition requesting at least one rural mail route from Columbus.<sup>55</sup> At that time, the only rural delivery service in the vicinity was the star route from Boheet. Columbus Postmaster Carl Kramer leased that route to John Davis of Seward for \$450.00 in 1901, but he thought that the area would have rural free delivery by the next year.<sup>56</sup> People who did not live along the star route had to

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., pp.84-85.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., p.103.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p.36.

<sup>55</sup>*Telegram*, February 7, 1901, p.1.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., April 26, 1901, p.8.

check at their local post office for their mail which was delivered by courier from the Columbus Post Office once every day except Sunday.<sup>57</sup>

Eleven applicants took Columbus's first test for rural mail carrier positions for three rural routes on April 23, 1902.<sup>58</sup> Two rural routes out of Monroe began October 1, 1902.<sup>59</sup> Rural carriers did not initially take the same civil service exam as the city carriers. Until 1912, rural carriers only needed to demonstrate that they could read addresses off envelopes, write out money orders, and count change.<sup>60</sup> They were usually paid six hundred dollars per year--three hundred dollars less than their counterparts in town whose annual salaries averaged nine hundred dollars. From this salary, rural carriers had to purchase and maintain their own horses and wagons, or, later, automobiles, whereas town carriers' only equipment was a pair of shoes.<sup>61</sup>

The pay scale for rural carriers did not accurately reflect the actual amount of work they did. Carriers were paid less than the base annual salary if their routes were less than the Post Office's standard twenty-four miles, but they were not paid more for routes that were longer than twenty-four miles. The Post

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<sup>57</sup>Ibid., May 10, 1901, p.1.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., April 25, 1902, p.1.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., September 12, 1902, p.1.

<sup>60</sup>Fuller, *RFD*, p.107.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., pp. 131 - 132.

Office Department also did not consider factors of population density, terrain, and road conditions when setting carriers' wages.<sup>62</sup> One of Columbus's rural carriers quit early in 1909 because he was losing money on the job. *Telegram* editor Edgar Howard had begun considering reentering active political life, and promised that if he ever got into Congress, the first bill he would introduce would be to raise rural carriers' pay to one hundred dollars per month for a twenty-mile route and an additional five dollars per month for every additional mile.<sup>63</sup>

Four local rural mail carriers joined the National Rural Letter Carriers' Association soon after it was founded in 1903 as a means to campaign for better roads and higher wages. The organization never had as large a membership or quite the political force of a labor union; nevertheless, rural carriers successfully lobbied Congress into giving them five pay raises between 1903 and 1914, until their yearly salary was equal to that of city carriers.<sup>64</sup> In 1904, rural carriers were given a sixty dollar per month raise to make up for some of the money they were going to lose when the Post Office began preventing them from carrying "non-department" items in their wagons.<sup>65</sup>

At the end of 1902, local merchants had a very low opinion of rural free

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<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup>*Telegram*, March 5, 1909, p.1.

<sup>64</sup>*Telegram*, September 4, 1903, p.1; and Fuller, *RFD*, pp. 133-134.

<sup>65</sup>*Telegram*, July 1, 1904, p.2.

delivery. When farmers came to town to get their mail, they often brought their families with them, and did quite a bit of shopping. Rural free delivery and catalog ordering coincided to cause mercantile business to drop off in the very small towns because farmers began purchasing fewer nonessential items locally, relying instead upon the rural mail carriers to deliver their orders from mail-order houses as well as their other mail.<sup>66</sup> As more rural routes were established, small town post offices began closing. The Neboville Post Office, which was about seven and a half miles from Columbus, closed on October 15, 1903, and its customers were put on a rural route from Leigh, which was about fifteen miles away from Columbus in Colfax County.<sup>67</sup> Routes two and three were extended on October 1, 1904 by a total of five miles, each taking some customers and territory away from the star route, which Postmaster Kramer thought would soon be discontinued.<sup>68</sup> In December, 1904, two more rural post offices that had been served by the Columbus Post Office discontinued service. The Shell Creek Post Office, located about six miles from Columbus in Colfax County, and the Boheet Post Office, about eight and a half miles from Columbus, closed on December 1, 1904. Shell Creek customers were placed on a route out of Richland, in Colfax County, about five miles from Columbus and four miles from the former Shell

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., November 28, 1902, p.1.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., October 23, 1903, p.1.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., September 16, 1904, p.1.

Creek Post Office, and Boheet customers were served by the Creston office, which was about sixteen miles away from Columbus.<sup>69</sup>

Requests for more routes were submitted to Columbus's representative. A fourth route from Columbus was scheduled to begin on April 1, 1904 to provide service to four hundred people in the Oconee area.<sup>70</sup> The route was delayed by political maneuvering, first by Platte Center's complaints that the route encroached upon the territory of its routes, and then by the struggle between the two factions of the Republican Party in Columbus.<sup>71</sup> People living northeast of the town were not on any mail routes, and requested that a new one be set up. Inspectors visited Columbus twice to look at the route, but did not start a fifth route in that direction.<sup>72</sup> The fifth rural route established from Columbus served farmers who lived south of the Loup and Platte rivers.<sup>73</sup>

Congressman J.J. McCarthy requested that the Post Office try to bring the free mail delivery service to all farmers in Platte County. An inspector was in Columbus for two months in 1906, charged with finding a way to have mail delivered to all farmers who lived within a half mile of a public road and to as

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., November 11, 1904, p.1. The Boheet Post Office did not completely discontinue service until January, 1905 according to Elton A. Perkey, *Perkey's Place Names* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1982), p. 153.

<sup>70</sup>Telegram, March 4, 1904, p.5.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., March 25, 1904, p.1 and May 20, 1904, p.1.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., September 23, 1904, p.1.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., September 22, 1905, p.5.

many others as possible.<sup>74</sup> Customers of Monroe's rural route one met with the inspector and made a request for their route to originate out of Columbus rather than Monroe. Their mail was often three or four days late, and they wanted punctual delivery.<sup>75</sup>

By the end of 1906, rumors were circulating that full county service was about to begin. To add credence to the rumor, Postmaster Kramer had been told to conduct an examination for rural mail carriers on December 1. There were not any vacant positions to fill and there had not been any particular routes planned, so the logical explanation was that full county service would soon begin.<sup>76</sup> Much to many rural residents' disappointment, the examination had not been a prelude to full county service. Shortly before the examination took place, the Post Office announced that only one new route had been established. Rural route six began serving Butler Township on January 2, 1907.<sup>77</sup> Farmers living between Duncan and Columbus who were not yet on a route soon petitioned for a new rural route from Duncan which would take some of the customers from Columbus's rural route six.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>Ibid., January 19, 1906, p.5.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., January 26, 1906, p.1.

<sup>76</sup>Ibid., November 2, 1906, p.1.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., November 9, 1906, p.1.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid., March 22, 1907, p.1.

Low pay and poor road conditions were not the only nuisances rural carriers encountered. The Post Office required rural carriers to count the number of pieces of mail they handled. In 1907, the Department began relaxing this requirement and allowed rural carriers who handled more than six thousand pieces of mail during April, May, and June to stop counting for the rest of the year. In 1907, only the carrier for route four qualified.<sup>79</sup> The next year, carriers were allowed to stop counting whenever they had handled five thousand pieces of mail. By the end of June, only two of Columbus's six rural carriers had not yet reached that goal, and the carrier for route five thought that he would soon qualify.<sup>80</sup>

Most rural people appreciated the service, and many went to great lengths to help their carrier. J.F. Siems owned the Oldenbusch Incubator and lived half a mile from his mailbox. A large percentage of the hundreds of pieces of mail he received each day were registered, so rather than making the carrier go out of his way to take the mail to the house, Siems rigged up a system of bells for the carrier to ring as a signal that Siems needed to meet him at the mailbox.<sup>81</sup> To spare their carrier the expense of a mail delivery wagon, the customers of route

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<sup>79</sup>Ibid., July 19, 1907, p.1.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., July 3, 1908, p.1.

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., March 18, 1904, p.1.



three purchased and maintained the wagon for their route.<sup>82</sup> Patrons of route four each gave their carrier one sack of oats each year to help defray the cost of feeding the horses, while people living along the other routes were reported to be considering a similar practice.<sup>83</sup> During the repair and new construction work on the Platte River wagon bridge in 1910, the route five carrier waded to the river to meet customers waiting on the south bank.<sup>84</sup>

To aid its rural carriers, the Post Office began setting regulations for rural mailboxes. Beginning October 1, 1905, all rural mailboxes had to have numbers. Postmaster Kramer thought that rural boxes should be numbered in series of one hundred--one hundred through one hundred ninety-nine would be on route one, two hundred through two hundred ninety-nine would be on route two and so on, so carriers could easily see which route a piece of mail belonged to while sorting. However, he was forced to adopt the United States Post Office's method of beginning with one and continuing into infinity for each route.<sup>85</sup>

Beginning July 1, 1906, all rural mailbox customers had to place a signal on their box if they had mail for pickup in it. The carriers were supposed to

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<sup>82</sup>Ibid., September 2, 1904, p.1.

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., October 14, 1904, p.1.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid., February 11, 1910, p.5.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., September 22, 1905, p.1.

put a signal on the box if they had put mail into it.<sup>86</sup> In order to reduce the time carriers spent at boxes, the Post Office in 1908 requested that rural customers use stamps rather than leaving loose change in their boxes to pay for postage. Whenever customers needed stamps, they could leave money in a cup in the box, and the carrier would leave the stamps.<sup>87</sup>

In 1910, the Post Office urged rural customers to paint their mailboxes and posts white and to paint their names and box numbers in black to increase visibility. It asked road officials to post signs at mailboxes at crossroads pointing toward the town with which the boxes were associated.<sup>88</sup> Rural customers were warned that if their roads were not in good condition, their mail delivery service could be suspended or discontinued. Rural carriers were instructed to tell their postmaster if they found sections of poorly maintained roads. The postmaster would then notify the customer or road officials about the sections of road that needed repair, stipulating how much time they had to complete them. If the repairs were not made within the specified time, the postmaster was to notify the Department which would send an inspector to determine if the condition warranted suspension or even discontinuation of service.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup>Ibid., May 25, 1906, p.5.

<sup>87</sup>Ibid., January 31, 1908, p.5.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., April 15, 1910, p.7.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., April 29, 1910, p.5.

Automobiles could speed up rural delivery when weather and road conditions allowed. In 1910, three of the Columbus rural carriers began seriously considering purchasing automobiles to use on their routes. They thought that they would be able to run their routes in half a day and be able to spend the rest of the time in "other profitable pursuits."<sup>90</sup> None of the carriers mentioned whether they had considered that they would still have to keep at least one team of horses to use when the roads became impossible for automobile traffic.

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid., July 15, 1910, p.1.

# Telephone Service: The Link to the Outside World

## Chapter 8

Telephones proved to be a much more important link to the rest of the world than did automobiles, trains, roads, rails, or bridges. Having a telephone made summoning a physician faster, and reduced the need to travel across town for a social call. As phone service was introduced, many telephone companies of varied sizes competed for customers. Most of them served only one town and possibly the rural area surrounding it. To provide telephone connections to other communities, these small local companies had to negotiate contracts with the services to which they wanted to connect. Larger companies, like the Nebraska Telephone Company, extended its lines between any communities that requested a connection and showed a reasonable chance of realizing a profit. In the Midwest, three companies provided service for large territories: the Iowa Telephone Company, the Nebraska Telephone Company, and the Northwestern Telephone Exchange Company. These three companies eventually became the foundation of the Northwestern Bell Company.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Robert H. Christie, *A History of the Telephone in the Midwest: 1875 - 1920* (master's thesis, Municipal University of Omaha, 1954), p.16.

During the first years of telephone service in Columbus, two companies competed for customers: the Nebraska Telephone Company (NTC) and the Platte County Independent Telephone Company.<sup>2</sup> The latter received much more attention in the local press, and its lower rates reputedly made it the preferred company. NTC had higher rates, but its equipment was of higher quality and it had more connections to other communities. The *Telegram* often referred to it as a “trust,” reflecting popular dislike of companies that had, or attempted to create, monopolies.

NTC had equipment in the Columbus area before 1900, when the County Board of Supervisors assessed its personal property value at seventeen hundred dollars, seven hundred dollars of which was in Columbus alone.<sup>3</sup> In 1901, the company upgraded its equipment, replacing the mess of wires it had on North Street between Eleventh and Twelfth streets with a few cables, installed a phone in the waterworks station, and extended service to Cornlea, St. Bernard, Lindsay, and Newman Grove.<sup>3</sup> A year later, the Platte County Board of Supervisors allowed NTC to put a telephone into Judge John Ratterman’s office.<sup>4</sup>

When the large companies introduced phone service into a town, most

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<sup>2</sup>Margaret Curry, *The History of Platte County, Nebraska* (Culver City, California: Murray and Gek, 1950), pp. 59-60.

<sup>3</sup>*Columbus Weekly Telegram*, June 28, 1900, p.1.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, May 3, 1901, p.1, July 26, 1901, p.1, and August 23, 1901, p.8.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, June 20, 1902, p.1.

residences were hooked up to party lines due to the high cost of equipment. Setting up a private line cost about forty dollars: twenty dollars for a signaling bell; ten dollars for the telephone and transmitter, which was an annual fee since most companies leased telephones; two dollars for each twenty-five foot cedar pole, seven dollars and fifty cents for a mile of wire, and six cents for each insulator, and all shipping and handling fees were paid by subscribers.<sup>5</sup> Having several people share as much equipment as possible greatly reduced costs. Since it was a virtual monopoly, NTC's rates were quite high, so at the end of 1901, some local businessmen went to Omaha to check into the independent telephone system.<sup>6</sup> The location of the meeting was ironic, since Omaha refused to allow independent telephone companies to establish franchises within the city. By the end of January 1902, a Columbus lawyer had begun creating interest in an independent telephone company and promoting Cottingham and Everett, an Iowa company, among local officials.<sup>7</sup> In July, the company petitioned the City Council for permission to establish service in Columbus. They advertised monthly rates of two dollars and twenty-five cents for businesses and one dollar for town and rural residences. They promised to install private lines rather than party lines, to connect rural lines to town lines, and to hook all of their lines into the

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<sup>5</sup>Christie, *A History of the Telephone in the Midwest*, p.49.

<sup>6</sup>*Telegram*, December 20, 1901, p.1.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, January 31, 1902, p.1.

independent telephone lines of other communities. The City Council expressed interest, and began working on a draft of a contract for the independent company to set maximum rates and to prevent it from merging with NTC.<sup>8</sup>

Representatives of the Cottingham and Everett firm began polling the populace to get an idea of how well an independent telephone company would be accepted. Response was overwhelmingly positive. The only reservation that people had was whether the independent company would have to make too many concessions to NTC to keep its rates as low as advertised.<sup>9</sup> After a month of soliciting the town's opinions, C.T. Everett decided that there was sufficient interest in an independent telephone company to justify starting a franchise in Columbus. Work on the system was scheduled to begin early in September, 1902, and the managers thought it would be completed before winter.<sup>10</sup>

Cottingham and Everett filed articles of incorporation for the Platte County Independent Telephone Company (PCITC) with the Platte County Clerk on September 3, 1902 with fifteen thousand dollars of capital stock and an authorized capital of forty thousand dollars. Its first officers were C.J. Garlow, president; J.G. Reeder, vice-president; G.T. Everett, secretary, and A. Anderson, treasurer.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., July 11, 1902, p.1.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., July 18, 1902, p.1.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., August 15, 1902, p.1.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., September 5, 1902, p.1.

Unavailability of long poles delayed the start of the project for a few days, but on September 5, the company began raising poles to connect its line in Bellwood to Columbus. Setting up the connection between the two communities preceded establishing Columbus's service because the first poles to arrive were for use along country roads.<sup>12</sup>

The company missed its target completion date by a few weeks. Only fifty of the one hundred seventy subscribers had telephone service by New Year's Day, 1903. The company manager said that it would not begin charging people for service until all subscribers were connected.<sup>13</sup> The new company had barely finished connecting all of its customers when a potential competitor appeared. The Farmer's Independent Telephone Company set up its headquarters in Platte Center, and began competing with PCITC for rural subscribers. The Platte Center-based company promised that within a year, one hundred farm residences would be connected to their service.<sup>14</sup>

After connecting all of its original subscribers, PCITC kept expanding its service area. It opened service to Polk County on February 27, 1903, and had made plans to extend its lines to Monroe.<sup>15</sup> A month later, the company had

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., January 2, 1903, p.1.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., January 30, 1903, p.1.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., February 27, 1903, p.1.



extended its lines to Creston and planned to expand to include Lindsay, Platte Center, and Humphrey as well as Monroe and the rural areas along all of those lines, with a local exchange at each terminus.<sup>16</sup> The waterworks station installed a PCITC line in addition to its NTC line.<sup>17</sup>

Reports from Dodge County about independent telephone companies merging with NTC had some PCITC subscribers concerned that their company would follow suit. The corporation's officers assured customers that PCITC had no intention of merging with NTC and was financially stable enough to resist merger pressure from the "trust." The officers also reminded their customers that PCITC's contract with the Columbus City Council prohibited a merger with any of the "trust" companies.<sup>18</sup> To further resist pressure from the trusts, the independent telephone companies in Nebraska met in November to discuss forming a state-wide association, but did not take any action to do so.<sup>19</sup>

Business owners and professionals had a distinct disadvantage with two telephone services in town. The two companies' lines were not connected, so people on one service could not call people on the other. To accommodate their customers, most businesses had two telephones, each with a different number, and

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., April 3, 1903, p.1.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., May 8, 1903, p.5.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., July 17, 1903, p.1.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., November 13, 1903, p.1.

published both in their newspaper adds. Most people had assumed that when the independent company was allowed to set up service, the old company would reduce its rates to remain competitive. However, even after PCITC had been around for almost a year, NTC had not yet lowered its rates to compete with the independent company's much lower rates. Columbus butchers decided to organize to force NTC to lower its rates, and refused to use its phones, even requesting that the company remove the equipment from their shops. One of the butchers briefly gave in to pressure from the company and left NTC's phone in his shop, but his fellow butchers soon persuaded him to have the phone removed. The "persuasion" was reported to be just moral support and kind words.<sup>20</sup>

In October, the PCITC planned further expansion, and stockholders voted to increase the capital stock of the company to twenty-five thousand dollars to finance the proposed lines.<sup>21</sup> Increasing the capital stock and rapid expansion led people to believe a rumor that soon began circulating that suggested that the company was on the verge of insolvency. C.T. Everett claimed that the rumor was false and had been started because of a suit against the company. An eastern manufacturer was suing PCITC in an attempt to receive compensation for a bill the company had not yet paid. The Board of Directors was counter-suing, claiming that many parts from that shipment had been defective, and the

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., August 7, 1903, p.1.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., October 9, 1903, p.1.

manufacturer had never replaced them.<sup>22</sup> Far from being on the brink of insolvency, PCITC gave its shareholders a six percent dividend on its profits for its first year of operation.<sup>23</sup>

In 1904, PCITC began connecting its lines to more independent services. In late April, the company announced that it was going to connect its lines to the Farmers' Independent Telephone Company's lines nine miles west of Platte Center.<sup>24</sup> In early May, it began a series of negotiations that hooked it up to a company in Osceola which gave PCITC's customers connections to southeast Nebraska as far east as the Missouri River.<sup>25</sup> By the end of the month, the company had set up a line to Peter Schmidt's mill in Shell Creek, and negotiations with the Osceola company had reached the point of deciding how to split the cost of the nine miles of poles and wired needed to connect the two services.<sup>26</sup> Negotiations with Osceola were completed in August, and PCITC announced that it would soon connect to a Lincoln company as well. It did not have any plans to connect to South Omaha or to Iowa until it could make a direct connection rather than routing calls through several different independent

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., October 16, 1903, p.8.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., January 1, 1904, p.1.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., April 29, 1904, p.7.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., May 6, 1904, p.1.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., May 20, 1904, p.1, and May 27, 1904, p.1.

companies' switchboards. The connection to Polk County had already made installation of another switchboard and hiring another operator necessary.<sup>27</sup> By the end of the year, PCITC had connections to the principal towns in Polk, York, and Hamilton counties, and hoped to be connected to Lincoln and South Omaha by spring.<sup>28</sup>

Extensive telephone connections could not overcome the language barriers between the speakers on the ends of the line. In October, 1904, T.J. Cottingham, a major stockholder in the company and member of the original partnership, addressed the stockholders of PCITC with a possible solution to the language barrier that he had heard about while traveling in Europe. He had heard about a telephone line between England and France over which participants in a conversation would each hear the other's speech in their native language. He and Everett were trying to get more information and some samples to try for use with customers who spoke English poorly.<sup>29</sup> The summary of Cottingham's presentation suggests that he was under the impression that the equipment itself translated conversations, rather than a human interpreter. Even in the late twentieth century, automated translation of speech is rudimentary at best.

Small shareholders became concerned about the way that Cottingham and

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., August 12, 1904, p.1.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., December 16, 1904, p.5.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., October 7, 1904, p.1.

Everett, as managers and the two largest shareholders, were running the company. At the beginning of 1905, Cottingham and Everett urged the other stockholders to pass twenty-five thousand dollars of bonds to alleviate the debt the company had incurred for its expansion of service during the previous year. The small shareholders were skeptical, and feared the beginning of a freeze-out since the managers bought most of each issue of stocks or bonds. By the end of the meeting, they were willing to follow Cottingham and Everett's plan, but remained suspicious of a plot to exclude them from their rights in the company.<sup>30</sup>

Managers of Nebraska's independent telephone companies met in Fremont after a rumor began circulating that the Fremont Independent Telephone Company planned to sell out to NTC. The managers of the other independent companies proposed buying controlling stock in the Fremont company at fifty cents on the dollar, if their shareholders agreed to the venture. Unfortunately, the independent telephone companies' stocks were not doing well on the market, and stockholders were unlikely to favor the purchase, even though it meant that the independent companies would not be able to connect to Fremont if NTC purchased its independent company.<sup>31</sup>

Because the independent telephone companies were all individual corporations, they had to make contracts with each other or with NTC for

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., January 27, 1905, p.1.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., February 10, 1905, p.1.

connection privileges. The independent companies had been formed to combat large firms like NTC, so they usually favored connections to other independents whenever possible in a spirit of “us against them” camaraderie. There were exceptions to this philosophy, as the managers of PCITC found out in 1905 when the Leigh Telephone Company, based in Colfax County, severed its ties with the independent company in favor of a connection with NTC.

PCITC began legal proceedings against the Leigh Telephone Company in May, 1905, claiming that the Leigh company had illegally broken a five-year contract for toll connections after only one year to enter into a similar agreement with NTC. Judges J.J. Sullivan and James Reeder granted an injunction against the Leigh Telephone Company, forbidding it to proceed with its contract with NTC until the charges had been investigated. G.T. Everett and T.J. Cottingham had controlling interest in the Leigh company, but claimed that they had not been informed of the new contract nor given consent to pursue it.<sup>32</sup>

The suit between PCITC and the Leigh Telephone Company was dismissed from Circuit Court in early 1906. The judge would not allow PCITC to prevent the Leigh company from entering into a contract with NTC since the only contract that had existed between the two companies was a verbal agreement.<sup>33</sup> The Board of Directors of PCITC was not satisfied with the verdict and appealed

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., May 26, 1905, p.5.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., February 9, 1906, p.1.

the decision.

In May, 1908, the Nebraska Supreme Court ruled that the verbal contract between PCITC and the Leigh Telephone Company was legally binding, and the Leigh company was in breach of contract.<sup>34</sup> However, this judgement did not end the controversy between the two companies which continued to argue over the validity of the verbal contract.

The Nebraska State Railway Commission came to Columbus on December 23, 1908 to try to mediate the case and to get the companies to reconnect their lines. Efforts at mediation were fruitless, so the Commission scheduled a hearing in Lincoln.<sup>35</sup> After hearing all the evidence in the case, the State Railway Commission upheld the Nebraska Supreme Court's decision, and ordered PCITC and the Leigh Telephone Company to reconnect their lines and to give their customers the same inter-company services as they had before the dispute began in June 1908. Despite the Leigh company's insistence that the Railway Commission did not have jurisdiction over phone lines, the two companies were forced to reconnect their lines at their previous rates before November 20, 1910.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, some of PCITC's services were disrupted for several days in

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., May 8, 1908, p.1.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., December 25, 1908, p.1.

<sup>36</sup>*Telegram*, November 11, 1910, p.1, and Nebraska State Railway Commission, *Third Annual Report of the Nebraska Railway Commission to the Governor, Year Ending November 30, 1910* (University Place, NE: The Clafflin Printing Co., 1910), p. 147. The State Railway Commission had jurisdiction over telephone lines because it was the only existing body that regulated transportation and communication across county and other boundaries.

late May and early June, 1905 due to damage from a bolt of lightning that struck Fred Gottschalk's house and traveled through the telephone wire to the company's offices. Several wires melted, some phones burned out, and the distributing board had been damaged, which gave operator Julia Fox a severe shock and disrupted service for one hundred fifty telephones. Almost a week later, the full extent of the damage still had not been determined.<sup>37</sup> NTC's equipment also suffered storm damage that year. An August storm blew down thirteen of its poles along the Meridian Road.<sup>38</sup>

While PCITC was making toll connections with Silver Creek and Beulah, and repairing and improving its equipment in Columbus, NTC put a long-distance phone booth in the court house because frequent long-distance calls had been confusing county accounts.<sup>39</sup> PCITC's most significant change was replacement of many of its wires with cables, which was supposed to prevent wires from crossing, breaking, and other forms of interference. The company estimated that it would need two miles of cable to replace all of its wires within the city.<sup>40</sup>

Representatives of PCITC and other independent telephone companies met with Omaha's Commercial Club on February 27, 1906 to ask for its help in

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<sup>37</sup>*Telegram*, June 2, 1905, p.1.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, August 23, 1905, p.5.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, July 21, 1905, p.1, and September 15, 1905, p.1.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, September 22, 1905, p.1.



convincing the Omaha City Council to allow independent telephone franchises to enter the city.<sup>41</sup> The Omaha City Council took a large step toward allowing independent phone companies to set up service in town in October, 1906. It adopted an ordinance that allowed a popular vote when an independent telephone company requested to set up service.<sup>42</sup>

NTC began twenty-five thousand dollars worth of repairs and improvements in March, 1906. It planned to install a common battery system so its subscribers would not have to ring central. They would just have to pick up the receiver and central would be on the other end, ready to call the number they wanted. The company was also replacing its single wires with cables.<sup>43</sup> NTC moved into new offices in Columbus without disruption of service in March 1907. In spite of a new system and equipment, they had reports of only two errors in service.<sup>44</sup>

Residents of Gruetil and Duncan formed their own telephone company, the Gruetil-Duncan Telephone Company, because the existing phone companies in Platte County had considered those towns to be too far away and too small to justify the expense of extending their lines to them. The new company planned

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., March 2, 1906, p.1.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., October 12, 1906, p.5.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., March 16, 1906, p.5.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., March 15, 1907, p.1.

to connect itself to the outside world through NTC.<sup>45</sup>

NTC apparently had not bought out the Fremont Independent Telephone Company. In 1907, the manager of the Fremont company arrived in Columbus to discuss the possibility of more toll lines between the towns.<sup>46</sup> Independent telephone companies were having a hard time getting into Omaha, but NTC began constructing a line exclusively for calls between Columbus and Omaha, and also improved its service between Columbus and Fullerton.<sup>47</sup>

Petite Martyn, daughter of Dr. D.T. Martyn, orchestrated the first reported series of prank telephone calls in Columbus. She hosted a slumber party, and she and her friends devised the prank as a means to stay awake during the early morning hours of Sunday, May 31, 1908. The girls placed a call, and when someone answered, they played telephone operator and claimed that the person had a long-distance call and asked the person to wait. After a few minutes, they asked if the person was still waiting. If the victim was still on the line, the girls told him to keep waiting, and hung up.<sup>48</sup> Petite's membership in a prominent family probably contributed to the *Telegram* treating the prank as an amusing diversion rather than an annoyance.

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., March 30, 1907, p.1.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., May 31, 1907, p.1.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., July 26, 1907, p.5.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., June 5, 1908, p.1.

To address the persistent etiquette problems reported in 1910 by rural telephone customers on party lines, the *Telegram* reprinted an article from *Wallace's Farmer* that reminded members of party lines to teach their children, and themselves, to refrain from listening to other people's conversations.<sup>49</sup> The telephone was much more than a source of gossip or entertainment to most people, especially those who lived in rural areas. Most businesses installed telephones from both companies, and many stressed in their newspaper advertisements how much shopping time their local and rural customers could save by phoning orders in ahead of time.

PCITC was probably the only entity that was not anxious for the new electricity plant to turn on its power. The company sought an injunction against the Columbus Electric Light, Heat, and Power Company in late 1908 to delay the beginning of its service. The phone company claimed that the power company had crossed several phone lines when it strung its power lines, and was afraid that when it turned on its power, the resulting surge of electricity would cause damage and interfere with service, and possibly create hazardous working conditions for telephone linemen. The electric company claimed that the underlying cause of the problem was that the telephone company had criss-crossed streets and alleys so many times that it was impossible for any other company to string wires without crossing some phone lines. Manager J. T. Burke of the

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<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, January 21, 1910, p.3.

electric company thought that the City Council, rather than the courts, should settle the dispute.<sup>50</sup> The two companies apparently settled their differences without intervention of another agency since nothing more about the dispute or a disruption of telephone service due to the electricity plant coming on-line appeared in the newspaper.

Representatives of several area independent telephone companies met in Columbus to discuss the possibility of building copper circuit toll lines between Columbus and Fremont, Columbus and Norfolk, and Creston and Madison. Connecting those cities would pull a large area into a complete circuit and allow direct toll communication within it, as well as to Omaha and Sioux City. The group also discussed the possibility of including Grand Island and select points along the Union Pacific line through Columbus.<sup>51</sup> Although the circuit would have pleased all their customers, the companies were unable to implement the idea, chiefly because they could not agree upon how to divide the cost of the construction.

By the end of 1908, the Burlington Railroad Company had installed telephones in all of its Nebraska depots. Once the workers got used to the new device, they liked it better than the telegraph system they had been using. The company had not installed the phones only as an act of magnanimity to its

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., October 2, 1908, p.1.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., November 27, 1908, p.1.

workers or to keep up with the latest technological advances. Taking telephone messages did not require any special skills beyond the ability to write, so almost anyone in the company could cover the telephones which made the communications network much less vulnerable to an operators' strike.<sup>52</sup>

PCITC underwent a management change in April, 1909. G.T. Everett and T.J. Cottingham sold their controlling interest in the company to Charles A. and S.B. Grigg from Everett's hometown, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. The new managers planned to continue expanding the company's range of connections.<sup>53</sup> In August, the new managers applied to Schuyler's City Council for permission to further connect Platte and Colfax counties by opening an independent telephone franchise in Schuyler.<sup>54</sup> The Schuyler City Council refused the Griggs' request to start a franchise in their town, claiming that residents did not want to support two telephone services.<sup>55</sup>

The Columbus City Council received complaints that both phone companies had been stringing lines in the streets rather than in the alleys. Not only was this unsightly; the wires were damaging trees. The Council referred the complaint

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., January 1, 1909, p.1.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., April 16, 1909, p.1.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., August 13, 1909, p.1

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., September 19, 1909, p.1.

to a committee.<sup>56</sup> A week later, the Council reminded the companies about an ordinance that had been passed five years earlier that prohibited the erecting of poles and stringing of wires in the streets, and ordered both companies to remove the offending equipment promptly.<sup>57</sup> Over the next several months, both companies moved most of their poles and wires into alleys and strung the remaining wires more efficiently.

Early in 1910, the independent telephone companies in Nebraska began taking steps to incorporate, so they could accomplish projects, such as completing an inter-city circuit, that they could not do before because they had not had a central management. They assured their customers that they were not forming another “trust”, since each company was still supposed to manage its own internal affairs and pay out its own dividends.<sup>58</sup>

By the end of 1910, PCITC was in good financial shape and controlled by local stockholders. It had only five thousand dollars of debt remaining, and was reported to have enough money in its treasury to pay that remainder. Most people hoped that the company would begin upgrading its equipment now that it was financially able to do so, since customers could often hear cross-talk during

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., June 25, 1909, p.1.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., July 9, 1909, p.1.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., January 21, 1910, p.9.

their calls.<sup>59</sup> The company had recently issued a large block of stock which was all purchased by local stockholders who then held a majority of the company's stock and took control of the Board of Directors. The stockholders' first collective action at their December 27 meeting was to remove most of the "foreign" members of the Board. A few non-local officers and committee chairs were allowed to remain, but they were also being considered for removal. Local stockholders had not been able to gain a majority of shares over the Iowa founders, Cottingham and Everett, or their replacements, the Griggs, until the latest large issue of stock. The new Board planned to spend between five and twenty thousand dollars on new equipment.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>Ibid., December 16, 1910, p.10.

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., December 30, 1910, p.1.

**Growth of Platte County Independent Telephone Company, 1909-1910 (figure 8.1)<sup>61</sup>**

	1909	1910
<b>Total Assets</b>	\$42,000.00	\$56,437.58
<b>Capital Stock</b>	\$31,450.00	\$30,950.00
<b>Bonds &amp; Bills Payable</b>	\$10,480.75	\$6,400.15
<b>Surplus</b>	\$866.72	\$19,087.43
<b>Total Liabilities</b>	\$42,871.87	\$56,437.58
<b>Gross Earnings</b>	\$12,936.16	\$15,107.00
<b>Operating Expenses</b>	\$8,228.80	\$8,585.97
<b>Net Income</b>	\$4,708.16	\$6,521.01
<b>Rate of Dividends</b>	7%	5%
<b>Dividends Paid</b>	\$1,921.85	\$1,829.00
<b>Interest Paid</b>	\$150.00	\$452.44
<b>New Construction</b>	\$1,000.00	\$3,248.65
<b>Number of Stockholders</b>	162	161
<b>Farm Subscribers</b>	280	310
<b>Town Subscribers</b>	592	668
<b>Total Telephones Installed</b>	872	978
<b>Miles of Wire</b>	495	607
<b>Feet of Cable</b>	11,816	11,816

Despite its best efforts, PCITC could not compete with the amount of money that NTC had to spend on equipment. As a statewide organization, NTC had more stock, and many communities, like Schulyer, did not want the financial burden of supporting two or more telephone companies or the hassle of duplicate equipment. NTC was the first company to arrive in most communities and since it had a larger network of connections and superior equipment, more people used its service in spite of its higher rates.

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<sup>61</sup>Nebraska State Railway Commission, *Second Annual Report to the Governor*, pp. 468-469, and Nebraska State Railway Commission, *Third Annual Report to the Governor, Year Ending November 30, 1910* (University Place, NE: The Claflin Printing Co., 1910), pp. 458-459.



**Comparison of Telephone Companies Operating in Columbus, 1908/1909 (figure 8.2)<sup>62</sup>**

	NTC*	PCITC
Number of Subscribers	42,937	872
Number of Stockholders	320	162
Total Assets	\$6,070,452.00	\$42,871.87
Per Capita Assets	\$141.38	\$49.16
Interest & Dividends Paid Per Shareholder	\$912.77	\$12.79
Miles of Wire Per Subscriber	0.14	0.57
Feet of Cable Per Subscriber	55.97	13.55
New Construction Per Subscriber	\$8.18	\$1.15
Gross Earnings	\$820,474.49	\$12,936.16
Gross Earnings Per Subscriber	\$19.11	\$14.84

\*Statistics figured using statewide data

Telephones rapidly became the favored means for Nebraska's sparse population to communicate with one another. Development of phone networks quickly outpaced development of roads, telegraph lines, or postal routes, and people were eager to take advantage of the new technology. In 1902, Nebraska ranked ninth in the nation for ratio of telephones to people. In 1907, it tied with California for third place, and in 1912, with a ratio of 165 telephones for every 1,000 people, it again ranked third, behind Iowa with 171 telephones per 1,000 people and California with 168 telephones per 1,000 people.<sup>63</sup> The number of telephones in Platte County had increased from seventy in 1902 to one

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<sup>62</sup>Based on data compiled from Nebraska State Railway Commission, *First Annual Report of the Nebraska State Railway Commission to the Governor: Year Ending November 30, 1908* (York, Nebraska: T.E. Sedgwick, 1908), pp.428-429, and *Second Annual Report of the Nebraska State Railway Commission to the Governor: Year Ending November 30, 1909* (University Place, NE: Claflin Printing Co., 1909), pp. 468-469.

<sup>63</sup>Nebraska State Railway Commission, *Second Annual Report of the Nebraska State Railway Commission*, pp. 428-429.

thousand in 1909.<sup>64</sup> Independent telephone companies were consumed or forced out of business as the Bell Telephone Company began growing and purchasing the major telephone companies in each region. Northwestern Bell purchased NTC in 1921.<sup>65</sup> The Platte County Independent Telephone Company survived a few years longer, and did not merge with the Nebraska Continental Telephone Company until August 31, 1929.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>*Telegram*, November 11, 1909, p.6.

<sup>65</sup>Christie, *A History of the Telephone in the Midwest*, p.26.

<sup>66</sup>Nebraska Railway Commission, *Twenty-second Annual Report of the Nebraska State Railway Commission to the Governor for the Year Ending November 30, 1929*, vol. 3 (Lincoln, Nebraska: American Printing Co., 1930), pp. 631 & 639.

# Public Health

## Chapter 9

By the middle of the nineteenth century, medical licensing laws in the United States had become ineffective, chiefly due to the rapid settlement of the West and the reluctance of “real” doctors to set up practice in frontier towns. To fill the void in healthcare, many traveling medicine shows and other “quacks” competed with midwives and others who had legitimate, if minimal, medical training.<sup>1</sup> Many towns were established without consideration of sanitation, and grew for several decades before it became an issue, by which time the situation had become difficult and expensive to correct.

As the “frontier” became settled, townspeople began to pay more attention to sanitation and healthcare. To meet this need, towns tried to entice doctors to establish practices and began looking more critically at the condition of streets and the practice of keeping livestock within city limits. As doctors ventured to set up practices, they found themselves competing with the popular medicine shows and home remedies. To combat the blighted image that the quacks and medicine shows had cast upon the medical profession, doctors began organizing at the local level in the 1890s. To encompass the local organizations, the American

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<sup>1</sup>Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order: 1877-1920* (New York: Hillard Wang, 1967) pp. 113-114.

Medical Association (AMA) reorganized in 1901, and its membership grew from eighty-four hundred to seventy thousand over the next ten years.<sup>2</sup> The renewed interest in a professional image caused the AMA to set and enforce new licensing standards, but the medicine shows remained popular for decades, probably because of the high alcohol content of the products. Home remedies also remained popular, and made up a large percentage of the advertisements in newspapers through 1910.

By the turn of the century, Platte County had a County Board of Health and a County Physician, and Columbus had a City Physician. The most frequently mentioned duties of the Board and the official physicians were health care for the area's poor, assessment of unsanitary conditions, and limiting the spread of the annual scarlet fever, smallpox, and diphtheria epidemics. The City and County physicians were compensated for their work for the community, but were reluctant to remain in the office for long periods of time because the duty took time away from their more lucrative private practices.<sup>3</sup>

Existence of a local Board of Health created an effective means of regulating health practitioners. In 1901, County Physician Dr. P.H. Dassler, allegedly acting under direction from the State Board of Health, filed complaints of practicing medicine without licenses against Drs. C.I. White and D.N. Newman

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p.115.

<sup>3</sup>*Columbus Weekly Telegram*, April 19, 1901, p.1.

who had opened an ophthalmology clinic in Columbus. Both of the accused pled their innocence on the grounds that they did not dispense or manufacture pharmaceuticals in their practice.<sup>4</sup>

Dr. White accused Dr. Dassler of acting out of jealousy since his practice had been thriving, and moved to Norfolk soon after Dassler filed the charges against him. Dassler warned White that the State Board of Health would pursue the charges if he started practicing in Norfolk, or anywhere else in Nebraska.<sup>5</sup> The State Board of Health dropped its charges against Dr. Newman when he was able to produce diplomas from three colleges and proof that he was certified to treat the human eye.<sup>6</sup> Dassler apparently had not acted out of personal or professional jealousy since he and Newman formed a partnership as eye and ear specialists a month after Newman had produced his credentials.<sup>7</sup>

The Platte County Medical Association (PCMA) was formed in 1901 as a means to regulate practitioners and coordinate efforts during epidemics. It held annual banquets in April which often featured speakers from outside Platte County. In 1907, Dr. J.N. McCormack of Bowling Green, Kentucky spoke about the need to eliminate the undercurrent of jealousy that existed in the medical

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., May 31, 1901, p.1.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., June 7, 1901, p.1.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., June 28, 1901, p.1.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., August 2, 1901, p.1.

profession, and the need to understand and communicate better with the patients. McCormack stressed the importance of educating the community on the basics of health care and sanitation in order to minimize the atmosphere of panic that pervaded the community whenever a rumor of epidemic circulated, and to eliminate patronage of traveling medicine shows.<sup>8</sup>

Over the next several years, the PCMA would come to appreciate McCormack's remarks about building trust and rapport with the community as its members tried to avert widespread panic when rumors of epidemic began. In September, 1909, Columbus residents feared that a spinal meningitis epidemic was going to hit them any day. Several cases had been reported south of the Platte River; two people had died of the disease in Fullerton, and a rumor was circulating that at least one case had occurred in Platte County. The PCMA assured people that it was prepared in the event of a spinal meningitis epidemic, but that there still had not been any confirmed cases in the county. The County Physician was monitoring closely a child suspected to have the disease; the Association had contacted a bacteriologist in Omaha in case the child had spinal meningitis, and the district school would be closed if the child proved to have the disease.<sup>9</sup>

At the beginning of October, Platte County still had not had any confirmed

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., April 26, 1907, p.5.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., September 17, 1909, p.1.

cases of spinal meningitis, but rumors of an impending epidemic continued to circulate. The City and County physicians, as spokesmen of the PCMA, were doing their best to avert complete panic. They reminded people that there had not been a single case within Platte County, and advised that the best ways to avoid contracting spinal meningitis, or any other contagious disease, was to maintain sanitary hygiene and food handling practices and to avoid public gatherings.<sup>10</sup>

Efforts to isolate people suffering from contagious diseases were not always successful. Many people continued to treat any illness that did not seem life-threatening with home remedies, and continued to go about their business and sent sick children to school, creating ideal conditions for an epidemic. As fear of a spinal meningitis epidemic waned, the *Telegram* questioned why homes were quarantined for unknown illnesses, but children with advanced cases of tuberculosis were allowed to attend school.<sup>11</sup> At the beginning of a scarlet fever epidemic in April, 1910, City Physician F.H. Morrow warned parents against avoiding quarantines by treating sick children with home remedies and then sending them to school. He also suggested that they limit their children's contact with other children at school and play for the duration of the epidemic.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., October 1, 1909, p.1.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., October 29, 1909, p.1.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., April 22, 1910, p.5.

Discouraging reliance upon home remedies was not the only challenge medical societies like the PCMA and local governments faced while promoting public health. Local governments paid most of the bills for medicine and supplies that impoverished families accumulated while under quarantine. In 1904, the Columbus City Council decided that it would pay all such bills for poor families living within the city limits unless the family was determined to be paupers, in which case the county government would be responsible for the bills. The Council also began investigating abuse of this service since recent itemized bills had frequently shown candy and other nonessentials.<sup>13</sup>

The County Medical Association also helped regulate medical fees and the compensation given to the City and County Physicians. From its beginning in 1901, the PCMA used its influence on the County Board to gradually raise the County Physician's annual salary from ninety dollars to three hundred dollars. For this salary, the County Physician gave treatment to the paupers at the county poor farm, the jails, and at St. Mary's Hospital.<sup>14</sup>

Doctors found it easier to raise their rates as members of an association than as individuals since they did not have to worry that others would undercut their prices. In 1910, the doctors of Platte County announced that they were going to raise their rates on all services except surgery. They cited rising costs

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., September 9, 1904, p.7.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., January 31, 1908, p.5.



of living and the much higher rates charged by doctors throughout the rest of Nebraska as their reasons for the increase of their fees. They claimed that while Platte County doctors currently charged one dollar for a house call within a one mile radius, doctors in nearby counties were charging two or two and a half dollars for the service. The doctors thought that the PCMA would approve a fifty percent increase to their fee scale.<sup>15</sup>

As the only hospital in Platte County, St. Mary's Hospital was vital to public health in the area. The Sisters of St. Francis established the hospital in 1879, and by 1928 it had 218 beds and was one of the oldest and largest hospitals in Nebraska.<sup>16</sup>

In May, 1901, work began on a new wing to the hospital, which was planned to be larger than the original structure.<sup>17</sup> Several months before the new wing was completed, the Franciscan nuns who operated the hospital petitioned the City Council to grant them free use of city water. The Council did not approve the request because the municipal waterworks was not self-sustaining throughout the entire year, but it did give the hospital a special rate: eight cents per one thousand gallons of water.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., April 8, 1910, p.1.

<sup>16</sup>Albert F. Tyler, ed. and Ella Auerbach, compiler, *History of Medicine in Nebraska* (Omaha: Magic City Printing Co., 1928; reprint, Omaha: University of Nebraska Medical Center, 1977), p. 511.

<sup>17</sup>*Telegram*, May 31, 1901, p.1.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., May 23, 1902, p.8, and June 13, 1902, p.4.

To raise money for expenses, the nuns periodically held fairs and bazaars. The bazaar held in October, 1904 was particularly successful, raising twenty-five hundred dollars for the hospital.<sup>19</sup> Money from fund-raising events helped pay for remodeling and installation of a “sterilizing plant” in 1906.<sup>20</sup>

Conflicting reports exist about the founding of Columbus’s second hospital. Tyler and Auerbach claim in *The History of Medicine in Nebraska* that the second facility was founded by wealthy sisters Mayme and Emma Matzen.<sup>21</sup> The Columbus Community Hospital’s historical summary claims that the second facility was established by Dr. C.D. Evans, Sr in 1921. The hospital’s summary contains photographic evidence of the structure’s existence, with Evans’ name prominently displayed on the capstone.<sup>22</sup> The Evans Hospital was renamed the Lutheran Hospital, and later the Behlen Hospital. In 1972, the two hospitals merged under the name Columbus Community Hospital, and the aging St. Mary’s building was vacated except for a few offices. A few years later, the building was condemned and demolished. The site is now the home of Loup Public Power District’s headquarters.

Although it had a variety of healthcare services, Columbus’s sanitary

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., October 28, 1904, p.5.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., August 3, 1906, p.1.

<sup>21</sup>Tyler, *The History of Medicine in Nebraska*, p.511.

<sup>22</sup>Columbus *Telegram, A Proud Past: A Pictorial History of Columbus and Platte County* (Marceline, Missouri: D-Books Publishing, Inc., 1997), p.98.

conditions remained marginal throughout the pre-World War I era. The city did not have a trash pickup service, and residents were expected to haul their own garbage to the banks of the Loup River so the current could wash it away. Establishing a city dump merely meant clearly marking the place people were expected to put their garbage, but most people did not waste their time on hauling garbage to the river, and let their refuse rot in backyards and alleys. Some refuse could be carried to the Loup River by the system of above-ground sewers designed to drain excess rainwater. People who tried to utilize this method usually expected the water to carry away too much and caused the system to back up, and refuse could sit in the sewers for several days before being carried away by run-off water.

Another hazard to sanitation and public health was the presence of “nuisance animals.” Like many towns and cities of the era, Columbus had a problem with people who insisted upon keeping livestock as if they still lived on a farm or in a small village, or allowed their dogs to roam the town. Unlicensed dogs were the most persistent irritant, and the issue was not completely resolved by the end of the decade. During the summer of 1901 the town’s dog pack had been larger and more irritating than usual. The pack had achieved such notoriety that travelers nicknamed Columbus “Dog Town.” Angry citizens gave the mayor an ultimatum: enforce the dog ordinance or we will

invoke the shotgun laws.<sup>23</sup> A year later, the dog problem continued unabated. The pack ran amok, attacking people and other animals. Anton Nelson was only one of the stock dealers who declared that he would kill any dogs he found in his sheep pens.<sup>24</sup> Despite the lack of enforcement, there were not any published reports of legal cases or social rifts resulting from stockmen shooting stray dogs.

The city attorney began developing a new dog ordinance which would comply with state law. Columbus had been taxing people at two to three dollars per dog, which the city attorney had ruled unconstitutional. *Telegram* editor Edgar Howard hoped that a lower tax would help control the city's dog population, or at least fill the city treasury.<sup>25</sup>

The year 1902 ended without any progress on the dog issue. More stock dealers publicly proclaimed to dog owners that they would shoot any dogs they saw on their property rather than lose more stock to loose-running dogs.<sup>26</sup> To quell the uproar, the City Council announced in February, 1903 that it would discuss the dog ordinance during its next meeting.<sup>27</sup> Two weeks later, the *Telegram* published the final draft of the new dog ordinance. Dog owners would

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<sup>23</sup>*Telegram*, July 26, 1901, p.1.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, May 16, 1902, p.1.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, June 27, 1902, p.1.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, December 19, 1902, p.1.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, February 13, 1903, p.1.

have to pay an annual license tax of two dollars for a female dog and one dollar for a male dog.<sup>28</sup> The city clerk ordered five hundred dog tags and designated the first four days of May as “dog days.” The new ordinance was to go into effect on May 5. Any free-roaming dogs not wearing tags would be impounded and the owner fined.<sup>29</sup> The clerk estimated one hundred dollars income for the city through enforcement of the ordinance.<sup>30</sup>

On May 1, 1903, only a few dog owners had licensed their pets, and the *Telegram* predicted that the people chosen to enforce the ordinance would have quite a bit of work.<sup>31</sup> Enforcement of the new ordinance did not live up to public expectation since the town did not employ a dog catcher; rather, the city police force was expected to enforce the dog ordinances along with their regular duties. Two months after the ordinance went into effect, most of the dogs running around town still did not wear tags. The *Telegram* staff recommended that the City Council either adopt a better method of enforcement or refund money to people who had paid the license tax.<sup>32</sup>

The next year, the City Council authorized the Chief of Police to appoint

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., February 27, 1903, p.1.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., April 3, 1903, p.1.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., April 17, 1903, p.1.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., May 1, 1903, p.1.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., July 3, 1903, p.1.

an official dog catcher. The Council intended to pay the catcher through the fees he collected: seventy-five cents for each dog caught and impounded and twenty-three cents for each unclaimed dog killed and buried.<sup>33</sup> For a year, the situation remained unchanged in spite of the dog catcher. The City Council estimated that only about twenty-five percent of the dogs running around Columbus were licensed. Fines for unlicensed dogs already ran from one dollar to twenty dollars, but the City Council was talking about stiffer penalties and stricter enforcement.<sup>34</sup> Their talk did not seem to have any effect in the summer of 1905. *Telegram* staff saw more than a dozen dogs sitting under a tree in Frankfort Park, and only one had a tag. They also noticed that two policemen and three City Council members were standing nearby and did nothing.<sup>35</sup>

Enforcement became more consistent in the fall. In October, fourteen dog owners were arrested, brought into court, and fined, jailed, or both, for failing to buy dog tags. Many more people voluntarily hurried out to buy tags rather than face the embarrassment of arrest and court.<sup>36</sup> Avid enforcement continued throughout 1906. By March, 1906, there was enough money in the dog license

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., May 27, 1904, p.7.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., May 19, 1905, p.1.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., July 21, 1905, p.5.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., October 13, 1905, p.8.

fund to transfer a small portion of it (\$225) to the general fund.<sup>37</sup> The City Council amended the ordinance in January, 1907 so spayed female dogs were licensed at the same rate as male dogs.<sup>38</sup>

In 1906, the *Telegram* reported that several people had rushed out to purchase dog tags under the threat of legal action, but most of them must have failed to renew the licenses, because by 1908, Charles Haggeman, the dog catcher, reported that only twelve of the estimated eight hundred dogs in town were licensed. Haggeman suspected a conspiracy among dog owners, because he had only been able to catch eighteen of the unlicensed dogs. He thought that dog owners were hiding their animals during the day and then letting them run loose at night. He vowed to round up all the offenders before winter.<sup>39</sup> A year later, only ninety-two tags were purchased and most of Columbus' dogs were still running around unlicensed.<sup>40</sup>

Columbus's dog problem persisted for so long because most residents did not perceive it as problem. Only stock dealers frequently reported attacks by dogs, and although an issue of the *Telegram* that did not contain an editorial comment about the dogs was a rare occurrence, most of its complaints were

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., March 9, 1906, p.1.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., January 14, 1907, p.1.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., June 12, 1908, p.1.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., April 11, 1909, p.5.

directed toward the amount of money the city could be collecting rather than toward health and safety risks associated with a large, free-roaming dog pack. Hiring a dog catcher and, later, establishing a humane society, were the beginning of a solution, but until the townspeople began to see the dogs as a problem, the pack continued to roam the area.

Dogs were not the only problem animals. Twenty-seven Columbus citizens filed a complaint against the Swift & Company chicken house, a poultry raising, slaughter, and processing facility, in September 1901. They claimed that the poultry house was a health risk and general nuisance to the surrounding neighborhood and wanted the company to relocate.<sup>41</sup> The County Health Board did not find anything to indicate that the poultry house was a health hazard, but it agreed that the establishment was unsightly and smelly. The Board recommended to the City Council that it encourage the company to relocate away from the residential district.<sup>42</sup> Rather than relocate, Swift's operators made more of an effort to keep their property clean.

Residents of the town's third ward made a similar complaint in 1903 against the Union Pacific Company's stockyards and slaughterhouse which were located near the southern boundary of the ward.<sup>43</sup> Union Pacific moved the

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., September 13, 1901, p.4.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., September 27, 1901, p.8.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., May 8, 1903, p.5.



structures outside the city limits after completing some construction and renovation of its property. The threat of unpleasant odors and vermin infestation caused people living near Fourteenth and Kummer streets to protest the construction of a veterinary hospital in the area.<sup>44</sup>

People frequently complained to the Council about neighbors who raised small stock, usually pigs or chickens, in their backyards. Columbus had an ordinance against raising pigs within the city limits, but did not enforce it consistently. In 1905, when two women complained about neighbors raising pigs, the Council immediately acted upon the complaint.<sup>45</sup> However, when neighbors filed a complaint against Anna and Joseph Koteka, the court allowed them to keep their animals. The chief complaint had been that the Koteka's pen was unhealthy and smelly. To determine the extent of the problem, Police Judge William O'Brien heard the case at the site. He ruled that the Kotekas could keep their animals if they would clean up the area.<sup>46</sup>

Large animals freely roaming in the streets frequently endangered pedestrians and blocked traffic. In the summer of 1902, editor Edgar Howard requested that the City Council begin drafting an ordinance to stop people from

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., October 9, 1908, p.1.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., May 19, 1905, p.5.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., July 8, 1910, p.1.

pasturing their animals in the streets.<sup>47</sup> The situation gradually improved. One of the final steps in the control of large animals came in 1904 when the city attorney began drafting an ordinance requiring herders to keep their animals moving in the streets rather than on sidewalks or through residents' lawns.<sup>48</sup> Most herders kept their animals in the streets, but a few continued to ignore the ordinance throughout the decade.<sup>49</sup>

Animal control was ultimately the jurisdiction of the police department, and the rudiments of a humane society did not appear until 1909, when a group of women approached the City Council asking them to draft a "be kind to horses law," and offering a twenty-five dollar donation toward its enforcement.<sup>50</sup> In early 1910, women petitioned the mayor and City Council to make the local butchers remove the calf-pens they had constructed in the back of their shops. The Council sent the police to carry out the women's demand.<sup>51</sup>

To safeguard the purity of the city's water supply, the City Council ordered the waterworks to cover its stand pipe with a bird screen to keep birds and other pests from drowning in the pipe and contaminating the water. The

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., July 18, 1902, p.1.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., May 6, 1904, p.1.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., August 26, 1910, p.4.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., September 24, 1909, p.7.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., January 28, 1910, p.1.

*Telegram* suggested that the Council's next step toward promoting sanitation should be to frequently flush the run-off sewers to carry away refuse that frequently collected there and produced foul odors.<sup>52</sup>

The Platte County Medical Association and the Columbus City Council took several important steps in the promotion of public health by trying to educate people about sanitation and its relationship to the occurrence and spread of contagious diseases and by creating laws to control animals and disposal of refuse. However, mistrust of the medical profession, the undesirability of the official physician post, and lack of enforcement of sanitation laws allowed annual epidemics to continue throughout the decade. The arrival of the telephone, stricter enforcement of laws, improvement of communication with the public, and advancements in disease control began to decrease the threat of epidemic over the next several years. The increasing popularity of the automobile also contributed to public sanitation. More people using automobiles meant that less animal waste lay in the streets attracting flies and other pests. The Good Roads Movement advocated by motorists and bicyclists reduced the amount of stagnant water that created unhealthy, swamp-like areas in town.

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., May 28, 1909, p.1.

# “The Best of Its Kind”

## Conclusion

By 1910, Columbus had undergone many transformations. Its population had increased by forty-two percent, and six additions to the city had been platted. The desire to provide its citizens with electricity or gas, to improve the town's outward appearance and improve public health, make the community more attractive to prospective businesses, and to “modernize” through innovations such as the telephone and the automobile marked the beginning of Columbus's transformation from a frontier town into a small midwestern city even more than its swelling population.

Technology brought about the most dramatic changes. The most highly publicized effects of innovations such as the telephone, the automobile, and electrification were the economic benefits to the town. The telephone and the automobile enabled people who lived several miles from Columbus to visit the town more than once a week and to schedule their time according to their own needs rather than around train schedules or the slow pace of animal-drawn conveyances. Electric and gas lamps began replacing candles and oil lamps as sources of illumination for homes and businesses.

These innovations also changed the composition of Columbus's labor force. The positions of telephone operator, chauffeur, and automobile repair garage owner all came into existence between the 1900 and 1910 federal census, and the increased economic activity created a need for more sales clerks, postal carriers, and other service-oriented positions.

People who most needed these innovations were often the last to get them. When telephone companies offered to bring service into an area, they first set up their equipment in a town, then spread service into the rural areas. Even if farmers had a telephone service, connections to towns other than the origin of the service could not be guaranteed and usually had to go through several operators. Similarly, the first farmers who owned automobiles found that the poor condition of many rural roads curtailed their use. As more phone lines were strung and roads were improved, these devices began to live up to the potential for decreasing rural isolation.

The delay for conveniences that town dwellers enjoyed to reach rural areas created tension between the two spheres. During the 1900-1910 era, this was played out most dramatically in the Columbus area during the attempt to finance a new courthouse building, but removal of hitching posts, limiting hours of business operation, and herders allowing large animals to trample lawns were all issues that created rural/urban tension. Repairing and rebuilding the wagon bridge over the Platte River underscored a different type of tension--that among three

principal towns of the area competing for farmers' business.

Health and sanitation were concerns among most cities and towns of the era, and Columbus's experience was probably typical of most small midwestern cities. More progressive-minded citizens wanted to improve the appearance and sanitary condition of the town, but the average citizen was reluctant to vote in favor of a tax to fund services such as garbage removal or street pavement when dumping refuse in the river or in the existing drainage ditches and occasional regrading of the streets was less expensive and more convenient. Although a few people refused to take part in the trend, the possibility of free mail delivery within the city caused people to become more aware of the appearance of Columbus's sidewalks and streets.

Over the next three decades, more state and federal funds would become available to finance large-scale improvements such as bridges, highways, and hydro-electric projects, but until then, boosters for such projects had to seek backing from investment firms and private donations to augment the limited funds available from municipal or county budgets. Newspapers such as the *Columbus Weekly Telegram* were instrumental in raising people's awareness of public health concerns and raising their sense of community pride to persuade them to approve measures that would ultimately improve the town's economic prospects. Intense editorial campaigns eventually produced results for Columbus's dog problem, approval for funding the construction of a new wagon bridge over the Platte

River, and for improvement of the city's streets and sidewalks. To reinforce this sense of community pride and reassure its readers that they were not being short-changed in terms of quality or modernity because they lived in the rural Midwest, the newspaper would go to great lengths to expound on the quality of any new construction or remodeling project, and ensure its readers that when completed, it would be "the best of its kind in the West," or "the best of its kind west of the Mississippi."

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