

Growth, Depression and War



Courtesy Bill Curtis Collection

Mayor Roger T. Sermon, shown here circa 1925, dominated Democratic Party politics in Independence for nearly three decades. Sermon was a longtime friend of Harry Truman and a passionate defender of the people's right to own the city's electric utility.

The 1920s were boom years in Independence. The city grew in both population and size, jobs were plentiful, and the municipal utility fueled the growth with inexpensive, reliable electric power.

During the 1920s, Independence began the transformation from a residential suburb of Kansas City and agricultural center for surrounding Jackson County farms to a retail and office center with suburbs of its own.¹ The transformation would continue through much of the mid-years of the 20th century.

The 1925 announcement by Gleaner-Baldwin Co. of Kansas City that it intended to manufacture farm combines in Independence was typical of 1920s industrial growth.² Location of the new plant was made possible by adequate supplies of electric power, and by the attractive industrial electrical rates inaugurated by Mayor Christian Ott back in 1914.

The municipal utility added dozens of industrial and commercial electric customers during the 1920s, and it derived substantial benefits from the thousands of new jobs generated during the decade. In 1925, the city engineer's office reported 183 building permits, 135 for new residences.³ In the two-year period from April 1925 to April 1927, the utility extended service to more than 500 new residential customers, giving the municipally-owned utility a total of 4,176 customers by the end of 1927.⁴ It was not unheard of for utility crews to install as many as 50 new meters a month

Roger T. Sermon

Roger T. Sermon served longer as mayor of Independence than anyone before or since.

Sermon took office in 1924 and served until 1950, a span of more than a quarter-century. For his entire career as mayor, Roger Sermon was the best friend public power in Independence ever had.

A grocer by trade, Sermon served during World War I with a Missouri artillery unit. One of Capt. Sermon's battery-mates in France was another Independence resident, Capt. Harry S. Truman.¹ The two would remain friends for life.

Following the war, Sermon found his real calling - Jackson County Democratic Party politics. He ran for the city council in 1922 and was immediately named to the Electric Light Board. The Dodgion Street Plant at the time had a bonded indebtedness against it, and service was declining. Sermon ran for mayor two years later on a platform of upgrading the plant.

His campaign promise was soon put to the test. Shortly after his April 1924 election, representatives of Kansas City Power & Light (KCP&L) approached the new mayor. They offered to buy the municipal utility for \$400,000.²

It was a tempting proposal. Across America in the 1920s, municipal utilities by the thousands elected to take the cash offers from neighboring investor-owned utilities or utility holding companies. The electric light plant was often run-down and in need of major cash investment. Selling the municipal utility to a well-heeled private utility was thought to be a wise decision.

Roger T. Sermon said no. With the revenue potential of the electric light plant, the municipal utility's bonded indebtedness could be retired in as little as 18 months, Sermon told city councilors.³ He asked F.S. Dewey, the representative of KCP&L, if the Kansas City utility could furnish power wholesale to the city. Dewey said that was impossible.⁴

Sermon stood firm. "Our engineers," Sermon told Dewey, "hired to investigate the condition of our plant and make recommendations to the council are of the opinion that the plant can be maintained and the necessary improvements be added from year to year without additional taxation to the people."⁵

It was Sermon's finest hour. He convinced the council to reject the KCP&L offer and instead embark upon an ambitious \$300,000 plan to upgrade the Dodgion Street Plant. The residents of Independence owe a great debt of gratitude to Roger T. Sermon for keeping the utility in public hands and making Independence energy independent for the next 75 years.

¹ McCullough, Truman, pp.108, 128, 136

² Wilcox, Independence 20th Century Pioneers, p.487

³ Ibid., p.487

⁴ "City Desires No Change," Independence Examiner, March 4, 1925

⁵ Ibid.

during that period.⁵

Not only did the municipal utility grow through the addition of new customers during the decade, those customers used far more electric power than they had just 10 years prior. Kilowatt-hour usage jumped dramatically during the 1920s, increasing from 2.1 million kwh in 1921 to 7.6 million kwh in 1929, a 350 percent jump.⁶

Ott had left the municipal utility in fine shape when he exited public life in the early 1920s, having presided over several upgrades of the Dodgion Street Plant in the years before World War I. His successor, Roger T. Sermon, carried on the same commitment to public power, a commitment which would span more than a quarter-century.

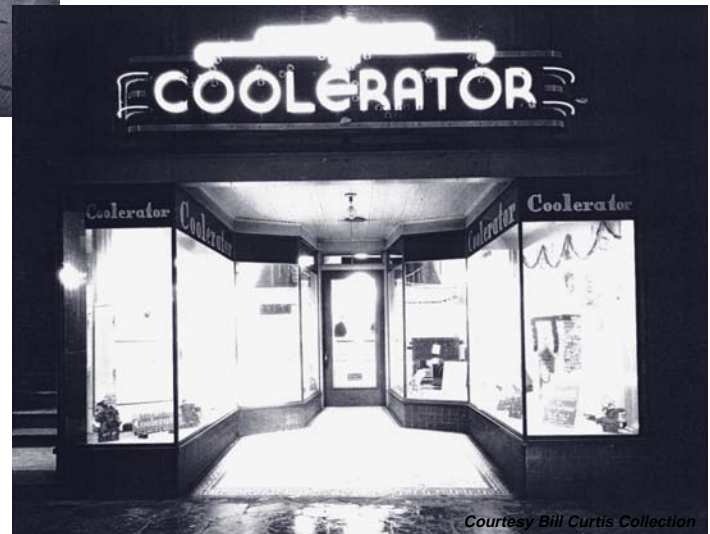
One of Sermon's first tasks when he took over as mayor of Independence in 1924 was to propose building a new power plant.



During the Great Depression, up to one-quarter of the Independence work force was unemployed. Those who did have jobs increased their electric power demand with the purchase of electric appliances then flooding the market. Electric refrigerators await buyers on the showroom floor at the Coolerator Store on North Liberty.

It had been obvious since the early 1920s that the Dodgion Street Station was showing its age and unfit to generate the additional power that was being called for by ever-increasing demand.

Sermon's bold plan envisioned financing the new power plant entirely from utility revenues. The electric utility had been a moneymaker for Independence since before World War I. Between 1919 and 1925, the city council saved \$175,000 out of net earnings from the utility. The figures for 1926 were typical of the utility's profitability. Gross receipts that year totaled \$176,000; expenses came to \$140,000. Profit for the year was more than \$35,000, and the utility essentially donated an additional \$30,000 to the city for street lighting.⁷



Sermon's plan called for the construction of a brick addition to the existing plant, along with replacement of much of the pre-World War I generating equipment. In 1927 and 1928, crews installed a 1,500-kW and 2,500-kW Westinghouse turbine-generator in the new building and retired several old Hamilton Corliss engines dating back to the plant's original construction. A new Henry Vogt boiler was installed, and an oil-burning system was added to increase the efficiency of the new boiler and three older boilers. Crews also put in new condensers and pumps.⁸

In 1930, the city installed two new 500-hp bent tube boilers capable of burning either coal or oil, along with preheating equipment to increase fuel efficiency. Consulting engineers estimated that the city would save 7-10 percent in fuel costs with the new boilers and preheating equipment.⁹

The replacement of the old Dodgion Street Plant between 1926 and 1932 cost the municipal utility \$300,000. Not a penny of the investment came from bonds. Economies of scale, bigger boilers and turbine-generators produced more power cheaper than the old equipment, meant that rates were lowered. Residential and commercial rates averaged 5-1/2 cents a kwh, while industrial power rates were as low as 2 cents per kwh for the utility's biggest customers.¹⁰ "The rates, in fact, are among the lowest in the state for a city of this size," one engineering magazine noted in 1930.¹¹

Hard Times

The city completed work on the Dodgion Street Plant before the Great Depression descended upon Independence. The collapse of the stock market on Wall Street in October 1929 ushered in the worst economic conditions in the nation's history.

The Great Depression hit Independence hard. Within a three-week period in 1931, three of the community's banks failed. Almost 3,000 people were on relief by the end of 1931. A year later, the welfare rolls in the city had grown to 4,500 people, almost one-third of the city's population.¹² One of the busiest places in Independence in 1933 was the Salvation Army soup kitchen on the Independence Square.¹³ The city-owned electric utility did what it could to alleviate suffering. Unlike many businesses, electric utilities were comparatively unaffected by the Great Depression.

Although unemployment rates in Independence and nearby Kansas City approached 25 percent in 1933 and 1934, that still meant that 75 percent of the population was working. And that 75 percent continued to purchase electric appliances at Stewart Brothers Electric Co. on West Maple Street.¹⁴ All those new electric appliances meant increasing kilowatt-hour demand at the Independence utility. The city-owned utility kept rates as low as possible during the 1930s and worked with customers who had fallen on hard times. In 1932, the city rebated 50 percent of residents' property tax bills if they were customers of the electric light plant.¹⁵ The utility In 1937 announced a 10 percent discount program for customers who paid their light bill before the 10th of the month.¹⁶

In 1934, Mayor Sermon negotiated a federal Public Works Administration grant of \$52,500 as part of a \$160,000 improvement project at the Dodgion Street Plant. The city put nearly 100 local people back to work that summer on the federally-backed job.¹⁷ During the summer of 1939, the city hired unemployed residents and put them to work oiling more than 22 miles of city streets in a public works improvement that was financed entirely out of light department revenues.¹⁸

By the time the utility-financed road-oiling project was wrapping up in September 1939, Europe was at war. Economic recovery was well underway in Independence. Sermon's longtime political ally, former Jackson County Judge Harry S. Truman, had been elected to the U.S. Senate in 1934. In 1940, Senator Truman helped secure the Lake City Ordnance Plant on the outskirts of Independence.¹⁹

Although the city-owned utility didn't serve the sprawling defense plant, it benefited from hundreds of new customers as employment at the Ordnance Plant skyrocketed following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The utility also benefited when the federal government installed new natural gas mains to the defense plant in October 1941. The Dodgion Street Plant quickly tapped into the new gas mains and installed natural gas boilers.²⁰

For the city's municipal utility, the war years were an era of unceasing activity. Utility personnel coped with shortages of both manpower and material. In their spare time, they planted Victory Gardens, collected scrap for the war effort and rolled Red Cross bandages for the sons and daughters of Independence residents scattered on far-flung war fronts across the world.

The collapse of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in 1945 was cause for celebration. But it was also the end of an era. The city's electric light department would enter the postwar world prepared to play a key role in the greatest economic boom in the history of Independence.

1 Bernd Foerster, *Independence, Missouri Independence: The Heritage Commission*, 1978, p.141

2 *Ibid.*, p.140

3 *Ibid.*, p.140

4 *Independence, Missouri Centennial: 100 Years of Progress, 1827-1927 Independence: 1927*, n.p.

5 Pearl Wilcox, *Independence 20th Century Pioneers Independence: Pearl Wilcox*, 1979, p.520

6 "New Plant Built Out of Profits of Old at Independence, Mo.," *Power Plant Engineering*, September 1, 1930, p.1

7 "City Electric Light Plant Represents Investment of Three-Fourths Million," *Independence Examiner*, n.d. (1927)

8 "New Plant Built Out of Profits of Old at Independence, Mo.," pp.3-5

9 *Ibid.*, p.3

10 "Become Better Acquainted With Your City Light Plant and Its Facilities To Serve You," *Independence Examiner*, March 5, 1930

11 "New Plant Built Out of Profits of Old at Independence, Mo.," p.1

12 "50 years ago," *Independence Examiner*, July 17, 1989

13 McCullough, Truman, p.187

14 "Efficiency At A Saving," *Stewart Brothers Electric Co. Advertisement, Independence Examiner*, March 5, 1930

15 "50 Years Ago," *Independence Examiner*, December 13, 1982

16 "50 Years Ago," *Independence Examiner*, February 14, 1987

17 "50 Years Ago," *Independence Examiner*, July 2, 1984

18 "50 Years Ago," *Independence Examiner*, August 28, 1989

19 Foerster, *Independence, Missouri*, p.141

20 "50 Years Ago," *Independence Examiner*, October 2, 1991