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# Independence At The Turn Of The Century

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**I**ndependence in 1901 celebrated the birth of the American Century in a uniquely American way.

Throughout much of the 19th century, Independence had been the jumping-off point for America's manifest destiny of a continental empire. The small community on the shores of the Missouri River served as the trail head for three of the nation's most important settlement routes into and through the interior of North America: the Oregon Trail, the California Trail, and the Santa Fe Trail. Every year from 1830 to 1880, thousands of Americans made Independence their last stop for supplies on their way to push the boundaries of a new nation westward.

By 1901, the frontier era in American history was past, its obituary written in 1893 by Frederick Jackson Turner, a young professor of history at the University of Wisconsin.<sup>1</sup> If, as Turner's thesis proposed, there were no more geographical frontiers to expand and conquer, then Independence was on the cusp of technological and political frontiers that would define the new century in America's heartland.

Independence residents in the summer of 1901 likely gave little thought to geopolitical issues or America's place in the world. The county seat of Jackson County, Independence was a lively place. The population of 7,000 had nearly doubled between 1890 and 1900, and the community boasted 12 miles of paved streets and eight manufacturing plants within the corporate limits. Independence was served by three trunk line railroads, and an electric streetcar offered hourly service to and from nearby Kansas City.<sup>2</sup>

But as they strolled around the Independence Square in the heat and humidity of an August Saturday evening in 1901, residents could see with their own eyes the frontiers that they and their children would advance and benefit from during the 20th century. Perhaps the best example of that new 20th century frontier was the set of arc lights towering over the Square. Sputtering in the summer twilight, the arc lights were the technological marvel of the day. Essentially a glass globe that contained two carbon rods, the arc lights gave off a brilliant light when a spark of electricity jumped between the two carbon rods.<sup>3</sup>

In that respect, however, arc lights were inefficient when compared with the incandescent lighting systems that were then becoming more common in Missouri and the U.S. Incandescent lights were characterized by a softer glow, and unlike arc lights, were cool to the touch. Then, too, incandescent lighting came from the filaments vacuum-enclosed in a glass bulb. Arc lights required the employment of a full-time trimmer to cut back the burnt-out carbon from the rods once or twice a week.<sup>4</sup>

That summer of 1901, the citizens of Independence owned the arc lights on the Square. The city fathers had seen the wisdom of establishing an electric light board in July of 1901, after voters had approved the creation of a municipal utility the previous March. A February fire which destroyed the small, inefficient electric light plant of a predecessor privately-owned company had provided the boost local government officials had needed to make Independence a public power community.



*Courtesy Bill Curtis Collection*

**IP&L crews in the early days used horse-drawn carriages and wagons and used boot hooks to climb poles. Here, Line Superintendent Harry Burchard and Earl Davis survey some of the utility's fearless climbers at a pole off South Chrysler Avenue about 1912.**

## A 1901

### Walk Around Independence Square

Historian David McCullough captured Independence at the turn of the century when he noted that the Square in 1901 “was the center of the world if the town was the limit of your experience...”<sup>1</sup>

At a time when most residents of Independence lived within walking distance of their places of employment, the Square was the center of the world. Dominated by the red-brick, Victorian Jackson County Courthouse, the Square was bounded by Maple, Main, Liberty and Lexington. On those four streets, the commercial life of Independence was played out on a daily basis.

Visitors stayed at the Hotel Metropolitan on the Maple Street side of the Square. Just down Maple was H.W. Rummel’s harness and saddle shop. Those waiting for repairs to a saddle or bridle could wet their whistle at the Courthouse Exchange Saloon .

In 1901, the young Harry Truman worked at J.H. Clinton’s Drugstore on the northeast corner of the Square. Just across the Square from the drugstore was the Ott-Mitchell Undertaking Parlor. The First National Bank, the Bank of Independence and the Chrisman-Sawyer Bank anchored three corners of the Square.

In between, there were all the consumer services that the citizens of Independence and surrounding Jackson County needed or wanted in 1901. On a Saturday afternoon, residents could shop at the lumberyard, the feed store, the tobacco shop, a shoe store, a hardware store, a bakery, the jewelry store, two grocery stores and an ice cream parlor. The post office was on the Square, and a resident could send a telegram from the Western Union office just off the Square.

On the second story of the brick buildings fronting the Square were a host of commercial offices, including dentists, doctors, lawyers and Miss Dunlap’s Dancing School.<sup>2</sup>

Electric power promised to change the Square in ways that residents hadn’t yet fully absorbed. By 1901, nearby Kansas City was growing by leaps and bounds. In some ways, it was more the center of the world for western Missouri than the Square was for Independence. And in 1901, residents of Independence could partake of that broader center by boarding the dark green Kansas City electric streetcar at the corner of Liberty and Lexington for the short ride to downtown Kansas City.



Courtesy Bill Curtis Collection

**Independence Square in 1903 was the terminus of a sophisticated transportation system that linked Independence with the growing metropolis of Kansas City. The big green streetcars operated by a Kansas City transit company made trips to and from the Square every half-hour.**

<sup>1</sup> David McCullough, *Truman* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992, p.55

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.56-57



Courtesy Bill Curtis Collection

**At the turn of the century, the Clinton Block on the Square housed a number of businesses, including the Clinton Drugstore, the second business from the corner. Owners Jim and George Clinton hired Harry Truman, a youngster from Independence, to sweep out the store several times a week.**





Courtesy Bill Curtis Collection

**George Clinton (left) and Jim Clinton (right) lost their drugstore on the Square in a 1906 fire. They later rebuilt next door.**

Public power had been a reality in the U.S. since the 1880 experiment with municipal ownership of the electric power facilities in Wabash, Indiana. As a political concept, public power had grown out of the Progressive Movement in late 19th century America. Progressives believed that electric and water utility services were as vital to the health and well-being of American communities as the maintenance of streets or the construction of sewage treatment facilities.

A growing number of citizens agreed with the Progressives. City officials in Independence no doubt had kept abreast of the virtual explosion of public power in the country during the 1890s. By 1900, there were more than 800 municipally-owned electric systems in the U.S.<sup>5</sup>

Ownership of the electric utility meant independence for the people of Independence. Profits from the sale of electric power would remain in the community and not line the pockets of investors in Kansas City, St. Louis or New York City. Public power kept electricity costs down and created a sense of energy independence for the community that is as pertinent today as it was 100 years ago.

For that, the citizens of Independence today and in the future should give thanks to the visions of the pioneers who first installed a small electric generator on Dodgion Street back in the summer of 1901.

<sup>1</sup> "Turner, Frederick Jackson," *Webster's American Biographies* Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1974, p.1057

<sup>2</sup> Brochure, "The Independence Fair," Independence, Missouri: Examiner Printing Co., 1909, p.2

<sup>3</sup> Beck, *Light Across the Prairies: An Illustrated History of Northwestern Public Service Company* Huron, South Dakota: Northwestern Public Service Company, 1989, p.14

<sup>4</sup> Beck, *PP&L-75 Years of Powering the Future: An Illustrated History of Pennsylvania Power & Light Co.* Allentown, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Power & Light Co., 1995, pp.33-34

<sup>5</sup> "Public Power in America: A History," Washington, D.C.: American Public Power Association, 1990, p.5