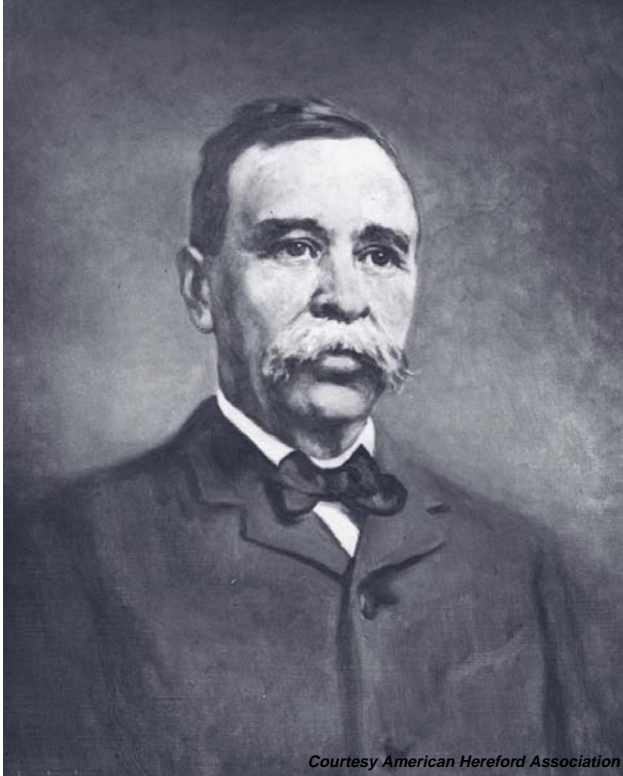


The Roots of Public Power

2



Courtesy American Hereford Association

Cattleman A.C. Gudgell brought electric power to Independence.

Like so many American communities, Independence first got electric power because local business executives thought they could make money selling the newfangled electricity.

There is a wonderful American myth that says Thomas Alva Edison invented electricity. He didn't. Edison was one of a number of American and European scientists, tinkerers and entrepreneurs who raced to develop a workable system to generate and transmit electric power to paying customers in the last quarter of the 19th century. Charles F. Brush, Elihu Thomson, Nikola Tesla and George Westinghouse joined Edison during the 1880s and 1890s in their quest to harness electric power.¹ Brush, an engineer from Cleveland, Ohio, perfected an arc lighting system in 1879 and helped light Cleveland's public square with a 2,000-candlepower light mounted on a steel tower that summer. In the fall of 1879, Edison designed a workable incandescent electric light bulb in his Menlo Park, New Jersey workshop.²

During the early 1880s, Elihu Thomson was developing both incandescent and arc lighting systems in his factory at Lynn, Massachusetts. Edison unveiled a commercial incandescent lighting system at the Pearl Street Station in Lower Manhattan in the fall of 1882, and the next year, he licensed his first community lighting system to investors in Sunbury, Pennsylvania.³ Elihu Thomson's Thomson-Houston Co. was a strong Edison competitor in the mid-1880s. Meanwhile, Pittsburgh entrepreneur George Westinghouse joined with Nikola Tesla, a brilliant Serbian immigrant inventor, to design an alternating current system

A.C. Gudgell

The grandfather of electric power in Independence was cattleman A.C. Gudgell.

Gudgell was one of the investors in the Independence Power & Light Company, which was granted a street lighting franchise in August 1887. Like so many early electric companies, Independence Power & Light couldn't deliver on what it promised. In March 1890, Gudgell reorganized the original company as The Citizens Electric Light Company.¹ Gudgell controlled 80 of the 241 shares of stock in the new company.² But for Gudgell, the investment in the electric power business in Independence was less a business opportunity than a civic improvement.

Gudgell was perhaps one of the premier cattle breeders in America in the 1880s and 1890s. From his Independence ranch, Gudgell and partner Thomas A. Simpson revolutionized the beef cattle industry in the United States.

In the early 1880s, Gudgell and Simpson imported Herefords from Great Britain. Americans were losing their taste for the tough, stringy meat of Texas Longhorn cattle, and Gudgell and Simpson worked hard to breed a cow that would thrive on the prairies of the American West while providing the beef that would solidify Kansas City's reputation as the stockyards of the plains.

Those early Herefords had one problem. Their hindquarters, where the best cuts of meat came from, were muscle and bone and not flesh. Herefords' skinny rear-ends looked to be the bane of the breed.

But Gudgell and Simpson - both of whom served as president of the American Hereford Cattle Breeders Association - bred a bull in Independence in the early 1880s that solved the problem of skinny hindquarters. Anxiety IV was the ancestor for nearly all of the Herefords in America today and rekindled Americans' taste for beef.³

¹ "History of the Power & Light Department"

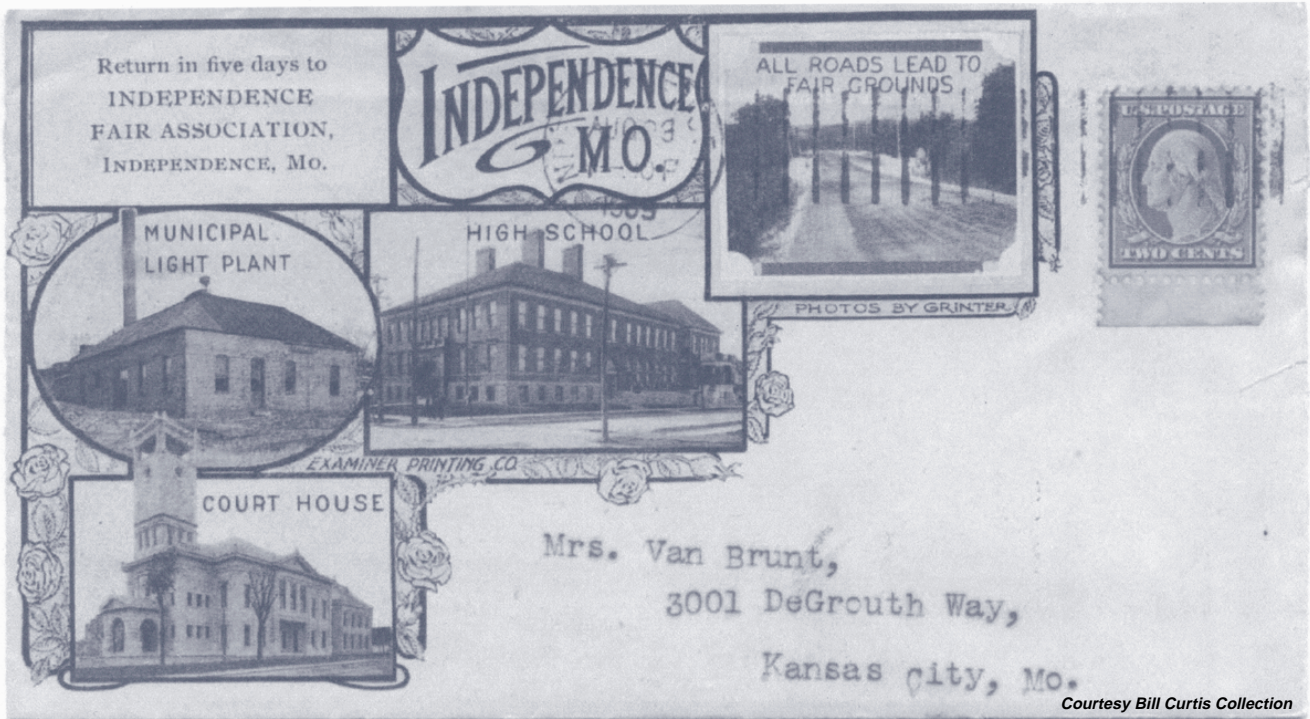
² *Ibid.*

³ "The granddaddy of them all," *Kansas City Star Millennium Series*, November 30, 1997

that was superior to Edison's delivery of electric power via direct current.⁴

In 1880s America, electricity was fully as much a technological marvel as computers and the internet are today. It could light homes, offices and streets. Electricity could power pumps and lathes in factories. It could operate parlor fans and toasters and other small appliances.

But electricity was also a business. Edison, Brush, Thomson, Westinghouse and dozens of other electric power pioneers made money by selling franchises for their systems to local entrepreneurs eager to bring the miracle of electric power to their communities - and to reap financial rewards.



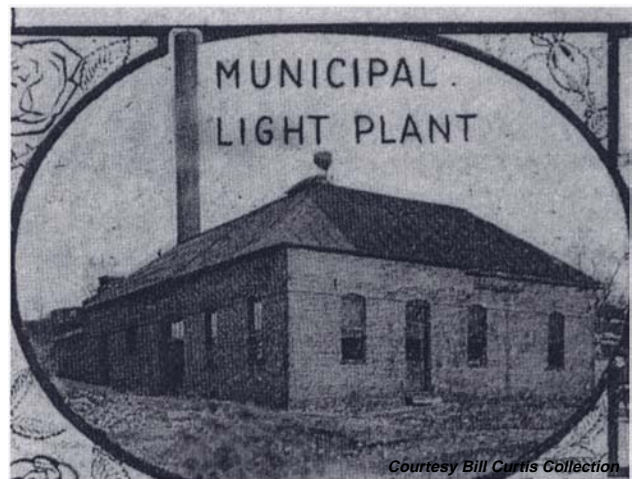
When the Independence Fair opened in the fall of 1909, organizers pointed to the city's schools, government offices, roads and electric light plant as signs of progress.

Like trendy New York fashions, electric power franchises got their start in the cities and towns of the East Coast and quickly worked their way west across the continent.

Electricity Arrives in Independence

Electricity came to Independence in September 1887 when Col. A.W. Jones, a Civil War veteran, approached the board of aldermen about a franchise for an electric light plant. Jones was part of a consortium of Independence businessmen who proposed locating a Thomson-Houston arc light generator in an old mill near the city's then Liberty Street Depot.⁵

The board of aldermen, for whom electric lights were a sign of a progressive community, readily agreed.⁶ The board stipulated that the street lighting franchise for the new company - Independence Electric Light, Heat & Power Company - be valid for 30 years, providing that "work be



The City's first municipal light plant was a simple affair, housing primitive generators that lighted selected downtown streets.

commenced in sixty days and completed within six months.”⁷

The power behind the scenes of the Independence consortium was A.C. Gudgell. A well-known local livestock breeder, Gudgell had been one of three aldermen appointed by the board of aldermen to report on the feasibility of the new electric company, a report which recommended that a franchise be awarded to Independence Electric Light, Heat & Power.⁸

The report, however, was not unanimous. Alderman J.P. Alexander, a member of the electric light committee with Gudgell, opposed the recommendation because of Gudgell’s dual role as a member of the electric company’s board of directors. Gudgell pointed out to local reporters that Alexander likely opposed the street light franchise because he was president of the local gas company.⁹

Independence Electric Light, Heat & Power had other financially strong representatives of the local business community on its board of directors. A.M. Ott was the co-owner of the community’s funeral parlor. W.L. McCoy was a prominent Kansas City real estate broker.¹⁰

Independence Electric Light, Heat & Power began business with two 80-horsepower Westinghouse engines and boilers, two arc dynamos capable of powering 35 arc lights, and an Edison incandescent dynamo capable of powering 450 incandescent lights.¹¹



Courtesy Bill Curtis Collection

Elvin Brackenbury (standing immediately behind the horse) was a member of the electric light department’s line crew in 1912. Here, crew takes a break for the camera after erecting distribution poles along West Waldo Avenue.

The electric utility that started out with such promise in 1887, however, soon faced the reality of the overwhelming capital investment cost of electrifying Independence. The next 14 years were a continual struggle for the privately-owned power company. The company was reorganized at least once in 1890 and renamed the Citizens Electric Light Company, with Gudgell, McCoy and grocer William A. Cunningham as the primary shareholders.¹² In 1892, Citizens abandoned the first power plant and moved the generating equipment to a second plant located on South Avenue west of Chrysler Avenue along the tracks of the Lexington Branch of the Missouri Pacific Railway.¹³ Sales never matched projections. Alderman Alexander’s gas company proved to be formidable competition in the street lighting business. Citizens also had trouble keeping two arc lights in operation on the east and west sides of the Square, lights that one contemporary observer

described as “bug attractions and little else.”¹⁴ Matters came to a head on the first Saturday night of February, 1901. Service had become so sporadic, and the condition of the plant so run-down, that the administration of Mayor Samuel Woodson had entered into negotiations to buy the plant from Citizens Electric Light Company. Those negotiations took on an added urgency on Saturday night, February 2, 1901, when a fire completely destroyed the decrepit, privately-owned electric light plant.¹⁵ Gudgell, the Independence livestock breeder who was Citizens’ largest shareholder, estimated the loss at \$5,000, none of which was insured.¹⁶ For Mayor Woodson and the board of aldermen, the fire was a golden opportunity to put Independence in the business of owning its electric utility.

¹ Beck, “Arc Lighting and the Birth of Public Power,” *Public Power*, July-August, 1998, pp.40-43

² “Edison’s Light,” *New York Herald*, December 21, 1879, p.5

³ Neil Baldwin, *Edison: Inventing the Century* New York: Hyperion, 1995, pp.137-138;
See Also, Beck, *PP&L-75 Years of Powering the Future*, pp.48-54

⁴ Henry G. Prout, *A Life of George Westinghouse* New York: Arno Press, 1972, pp.233-247

⁵ “Independence: An Electric Light Franchise,” *Kansas City Daily Journal*, September 7, 1887

⁶ Ordinance No. 55, *Electric Light*, September 6, 1887, *Independence City Ordinances*, pp.250-251

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *The Kansas City Journal*, February 27, 1888

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Letter, W.L. McCoy, Kansas City, to M.K. McGrath, Missouri Secretary of State, Jefferson City, September 21, 1887

¹¹ *Kansas City Times*, December 31, 1887

¹² “History of the Power & Light Department,”
Independence Power & Light History Files, n.d., p.1

¹³ Handwritten Note, *Independence Power & Light History Files*, n.d.

¹⁴ Quoted in “Story of the City’s Light Plant Dates Back To Start of Century,”
Jackson County Examiner, January 6, 1953

¹⁵ “Electric Plant Burned,” *Independence Examiner*, February 6, 1901

¹⁶ *Ibid.*