"Life Without"

Automobiles & Rural Electrification in 20th-Century Iowa

by Tom Morain

I watched my son Michael wait one morning with increasing frustration as our home computer printer churned out the pages of a high school English paper. He was late. He had not allowed himself enough time to print out the assignment he had composed the night before. As he saw it, the problem was our printer. The printers at school were faster.

Poor deprived child of the computer age. This was a paper, of course, that he had composed, edited, checked for spelling and grammar errors, and formatted all on a word processor. He had freely revised sentences on the first page without retyping everything that followed. To my knowledge, he has never in his life experienced the vocabulary-building episode common to my generation of typing off the bottom of the sheet at 2:30 a.m. and then having to retype the entire page. He did not use typewriter erasers with the little brush on one end, erasable bond, correction fluid, or those little "type over" squares with white stuff on the back that camouflages typing errors. I don't know that this teenager has ever even seen carbon paper. His frustration stemmed from his perception that our printer was too slow.

Like Michael, we all base our perceptions, expectations, and ideals on our experiences. When I worked at Living History Farms, I frequently overheard visitors in the 1850 pioneer cabin reciting the litany of modern conveniences that Iowa settlers had lacked. The visitors tried to imagine "life without"—life without a refrigerator, life without television, without air-conditioning, telephones, microwaves, computer games, skateboards, pizza delivery. Sometimes they admired the pioneers for their fortitude; more often they pitied them for what they must have endured in their deprivation.

How easy it is to define the lives of previous generations in terms of what they lacked, but how hard to imagine how future generations will view our own era. We too must be living lives without—but without what? What are those things for which our great-grandchildren will praise or pity us for surviving without? Just as we find it ludicrous to think that settlers sat around bemoaning their lack of television, we resent a future assessment of our own lives as diminished by the absence of unimagined conveniences.

A Few of Our Favorite Things: 100 Creations of the 20th Century is an exhibit urging us to think about the inventions and innovations of the 20th century that have reshaped the patterns and rhythms of our daily lives. While the museum exhibit is organized into a 100 separate objects (as is this issue of *Iowa Heritage Illustrated*), the goal is not to justify the inclusion of a particular item or the exclusion of another. Instead, we are hoping that visitors begin to reflect on how the

material culture that surrounds us affects our routines, expectations, and dreams. When I have a headache, I reach for a jar of aspirin and expect the pain to be gone in a half-hour. People had headaches before aspirin. How did they handle theirs? What did people use before transparent tape? Imagine the thrill of pulling up a zipper for the first time. Some inventions have become such a part of today's landscape that it is hard to imagine a world without them.

While some technological innovations created little tremors in our daily patterns, others were earthquakes that shook almost every familiar landmark and toppled many. Two of these major tremors were the Model-T Ford and the electrification of rural America. Were I required to identify the most significant developments of the 20th century, the automobile and the electrification of the home would certainly make it onto my short list. For us, "life without" either of them would be unrecognizable.

The Model-T Ford was not the first automobile invented, but more than any other model, it was Ford's Tin Lizzie that converted Americans to automobiles. Useful, reliable, inexpensive, and easy to operate and maintain, the Model-T opened a new world of possibilities for Iowa families, particularly for rural residents who often had to forgo the advantages and pleasures of community opportunities when horsepower meant exactly that. Midwestern states quickly rose to the top in car ownership per family. In 1909, *Collier's Magazine* reported that one out of 34 Iowa farm families owned a car, compared with one out of 190 families in New York City. By 1920 in rural Greene County, local sources estimated that there was one automobile for every five residents. And the odds were even better that the car was a Ford. In 1917, almost six out of every ten new cars sold were Model-Ts.

Everyone who had ever owned a Model-T had a story about it. You backed it up a steep hill to keep the gas flowing to the engine. You could fix any Ford motor with "chewing gum and baling twine." You could plug a leak in the radiator by cracking an egg into it. You could jack up the back axle on Monday morning and run your washing machine with it. If you couldn't fix your flat with a patch, you could fill the tire with oats and limp into town.

Less obvious but with far wider-reaching implications, however, were the changes in the patterns of everyday life that emerged with the widespread adoption of Model-Ts and their contemporaries. As the concept of time and distance changed, so did expectations. Automobile drivers demanded better roads, a responsibility that had formerly resided with government at the township level or lower. What had worked when local residents were the only ones who used local roads was no longer adequate when families began taking vacations and traveling to distant cities. Political power shifted first to the counties and then to the state and even to the federal government with its system of interstate highways. Community and neighborhood boundaries shifted. Farm families, formerly stuck at home on Sunday to give workhorses a day of rest from fieldwork, took to the countryside and towns. The German-speaking Amana colonies, once relatively isolated in the practice of their communal customs, began to be a popular destination for curious sightseers out for a Sunday drive.

Farm children who had once walked to the nearest country school could now be driven to a consolidated school in a nearby town, or they could even live at home and attend town high school without having to board in town during the week. As one rural schoolteacher noted, the automobile seemed to make people aware that the "automobile world" was larger than their own neighborhoods and that their children needed more education to survive in it. School consolidations and high-school enrollment shot up dramatically.

Automobiles provided individuals with options they had not had before, and in exercising those options, Iowa residents reshaped the natural, political, economic, and social landscape of the state. I think about that frequently on my daily 40-mile commute between my home in Ames and my office in Des Moines. Four- and six-lane highways built to accommodate the heaviest hours of traffic are crowded with commuters. Although I know a dozen Ames residents who also commute to Des Moines, some of whom live only a few blocks from our house, I drive down alone, on *my* schedule, listening to *my* cassettes and radio programs, having *my* car available for *my* errands through the day. From all over central Iowa we coagulate into parking lots and huge office buildings, one fiercely independent driver per car.

When Iowans a century from now reflect back on our times, for what will they pity or admire us? That we endured daily commutes? That we paid huge tax bills to maintain an enormous web of concrete? That we lacked the technology to allow us to communicate freely without being in physical proximity? That we had to rely on our own vehicles, slower, more expensive, and less safe than mass transit systems yet to come?

Or will the next century follow a different sce-

nario? Decades after the invention of the automobile came the invention of the computer and all its technological companions—fax machines, scanners, cell phones, the Internet, teleconferences, e-commerce. Many of the functions that traditionally brought us together, that could be accomplished only through face-to-face interaction—functions that made transportation so critical—can now be done electronically. You can now order pet supplies through the Internet and have them delivered to your door within 24 hours. You don't need to drive to the store to get them. Clothing, books, airline tickets, even groceries—the computer is revolutionizing shopping. Colleges are experimenting with on-line courses so that the entire world becomes their potential campus. Will we continue to build huge office buildings with enormous parking lots connected by multi-lane freeways so that we can bring together workers, or will we continue to develop communications technologies that eliminate the need for doing business in adjoining office cubicles? Understanding how the automobile transformed our lives through the 20th century may be as good a starting point as any in helping us envision how the computer might revolutionize life in the 21st.

A second colossal technological achievement of the 20th century was rural electrification. Many Iowa communities were constructing local power plants and stringing wires house to house before the turn of the century. In my hometown of Jefferson, the local paper crowed with delight in 1892 when the generators of the Jefferson Light, Heat, Power and Water Company fired up for the first time: "The first electric light that ever shone in Jefferson struggled into existence down at the power house not far from nine o'clock last night and threw a strong radiance all about the premises that showed its intimate acquaintance with the Grand Master Workman of all light—the sun."

In 1907, the power company offered Jefferson women a free home trial of electric irons. Try one for three weeks, the notice read, and if you don't like it, bring it back and return to the drudgery of your heavy stove-heated irons in sweltering kitchens. The campaign was so successful that in a few months the power company had to beg local matrons to use their irons only on Tuesday and Wednesday mornings, when the generators could go into high speed to produce the extra power the irons required. Irons and electric lights were but the first wave of home improvements. Portable vacuum sweepers, invented in

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the years shortly before World War I, were commonplace by the 1920s. Electric waffle irons, radios, fans, water heaters, kitchen ranges, toasters, refrigerators, and washing machines all made their debut in Iowa households wired for electricity.

Those homes, however, were overwhelmingly in towns and cities, not in the rural countryside. By 1925, when two-thirds of Iowans were living in rural areas, only one out of ten farm families had electricity. It was far easier and more economical to wire up homes across small backyards in town than to connect power lines to a few farm houses scattered across acres of corn, hay, and pasture. Farmers without electricity milked cows by hand in the light of kerosene lanterns. Farm women cooked over a wood- or coal-burning stove and washed clothes by hand on a washboard. Farm children pumped water and carried it in buckets to the kitchen and the barn. An icehouse, well, or farm cellar provided the only means of keeping foods cool. The privy took on an identity as a rural institution.

The problem, of course, was not that farm life was growing worse; it was that life in town was growing

Above: An early automobile parade in New London, Iowa.

better. Farm families' awareness of what was possible rose with each trip to town or each issue of an illustrated magazine. For more than four decades after town homes were wired for electricity, Iowa farm families endured the pity or condescension of townsfolk who took electric lights, central heating, or bathrooms for granted. What was sapping the morale of the farm family was the seemingly inescapable fact that no matter how hard they worked or how profitable their operation was, they were doomed to physical drudgery, unhealthy conditions, and daily discomforts that their town neighbors were forgetting had ever existed. As long as farm homes could not offer the comforts of town, farm children had to choose at some point between their parents' farm traditions and the conveniences they wanted for themselves and their own children. Iowa farm editor Herbert Quick put his finger on the dilemma in a 1913 magazine article for *Good Housekeeping*: "There is a woman here and a woman there who sees that the whole scheme of family life falls to ruin if the [farm] home suffers in comparison with homes of those friends and relatives who live on wages in the towns. She and her husband begin to realize that it does not pay to build the farm up into a profitable property which is despised by the very children for whom they are giving their lives."

Salvation came with the 1935 passage of the Rural Electrification Act, a New Deal measure that provided low-interest loans to finance the construction of rural electric lines. Cooperatives composed of the farm families who used the service formed to apply for the loans. When private power companies showed reluctance to supply the co-ops with electricity, the co-ops built their own generating plants. Slowly across a Depression-weary countryside, the lights started to go on.

One woman remembered that her mother cried as the family stood in their farmyard at sunset and watched as her brother flipped the switches that lit up the newly installed light bulbs. She said she didn't understand at the time what having electricity meant

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Rural electrification allowed farm families to enjoy appliances like refrigerators, which most town families had had for years.

to her mother. It wasn't just that her mother could enjoy labor-saving devices. It meant that her parents could want her to stay on the farm if she chose to do so.

Another woman remembered the first thing she and her mother did the morning the "juice" was hooked up to their home. They jumped in the car, drove into town, bought several boxes of Jell-O, drove back home, and made it for supper. Before rural electrification, only town families could make Jell-O because it required refrigeration. For that woman, the Rural Electrification Act—and perhaps the entire New Deal—could be summarized in one word: Jell-O. They could now have what town families had.

In addition to the automobile, rural electrification did much to eliminate the disadvantages that threatened to stigmatize farm life into a second-class existence. Farm families knew "life without" because they had been living it. The electrification of the home was a tremendous technological accomplishment of the 20th century. It was the Rural Electrification Act of 1935 and the developments that flowed from it that spread the blessings of electrical technology to the rural half of the American public. We could again aspire to be one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty, justice, and electric toasters for all.

History is the story of what happened and why, but it can also be the story of what didn't happen and why. *A Few of Our Favorite Things* exhibit and this companion publication feature what came into being. To imagine what wasn't or hasn't been invented, you need to use your imagination, but the reward is worth the effort.

For example, let us look at the story of electricity from a different angle. For the past hundred years, American technology has been producing more and more electrical home appliances and gadgets to help us simplify household chores—tasks done within the home. While American families were purchasing these devices that made the tasks easier, what didn't happen was the development of industries that removed these tasks from the home or commercialized them.

That was the dream of feminist philosopher Charlotte Perkins Gilman at the turn of the 20th century. In her 1902 book, *The Home, Its Work and Influence*, Gilman pointed out the economic inefficiencies of building a kitchen in every home where one worker, the housewife, cooked for her family only. She advocated new apartment buildings with commercial kitchens in the basement where a few trained chefs could cook meals for the entire building, purchasing food in quantity (and hence more economically than the lone housewife), and preparing it better. She bemoaned the lack of progress in housework, arguing that women should specialize and apply the principles of the industrial revolution to their own roles as men had to theirs. Why not commercial laundries that washed and ironed factory-style? Why not housecleaning services? Let women move into the work force and specialize, she argued, and we'd soon see advances in the care of the home and family equal to that occurring in manufacturing.

But alas, Gilman's vision was not to materialize in the near future. The traditional ideology of the family was too deeply implanted to accept an arrangement of wage-earning wives operating commercial kitchens, laundries, and child care centers. Instead of taking those functions out of the home, American manufacturers provided electric household appliances that reduced their drudgery. We assumed that there would always be someone available—the housewife—to perform those tasks. Electrical appliances now made them easier. It was not until the second half of the 20th century, when women began taking jobs outside the home in record numbers, that large-scale industries developed to commercialize traditional household functions. Fast-food restaurants, delicatessens in grocery stores that offer eat-in or take-out options, child care centers, and housecleaning companies appeared in response to the time pressures on two-income families.

A Few of Our Favorite Things invites us to stretch our imaginations. Some items in it seem so commonplace that we may never have stopped to consider that they could ever have been new and intriguing. Others, while once an innovative improvement, have already been supplanted by something even better. But what isn't here? What might have been invented had there been more of a demand for it? And what will be here in a future exhibit but hasn't been invented yet? What are those things that will intrigue our great-grandchildren when they stroll through a similar exhibit a century from now? When they think back on life in the year 2000 and chuckle at how primitive our cell phones and computers look, they too will take for granted conveniences unknown to us. What will be on their list of inventions that changed daily life in the 21st century? There is much that meets the eye in this exhibit. There is even more that exists to the eye of the mind willing to imagine. ❖

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