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# The Lincoln Hotel in Lowden

## Capturing Trade on the Lincoln Highway

by Jan Olive Nash

### The Stories Behind the Sites

Historic places are often reluctant to reveal their pasts. The historical facts must be pried out of rotting doorsills and weak flooring, gleaned out of property records and plat maps, coaxed out of people's memories and photo albums, sifted out of local lore and legend. Then they must be dovetailed back into the sense of time and place to derive their real meaning, dimension, and significance.

Yet for those of us who long to understand the past, to inhabit it in our imaginations, preserving historic places and resurrecting their stories offer a wonderful bonus: we can amble around the buildings, pace off the sites, climb the steps, breathe the atmosphere. Through historic places, we can get that much closer to the everyday drama of the past because we can walk onto the stage.

In this issue, *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* launches a new series showcasing Iowa's historic structures and places. Iowa has roughly 5,000 structures on the National Register of Historic Places and many that are judged eligible. Behind every one of those places is a story of why that site is significant to local, state, or national history. —The Editor

**C**elia Daehn Clemmens saw a golden opportunity in a jog in the road. Clemmens worked in the Railroad Hotel in Lowden, Iowa, halfway between Clinton and Cedar Rapids. Well aware that railroad travelers needed food and lodging, she realized that the new kind of traveler of the 20th century—the automobile tourist—would need the same.

Thus was born Lowden's Lincoln Hotel, built in 1915. Today it stands as a significant state and local example of the tremendous

**Above:** The Lincoln Hotel in Lowden, from an early postcard.



impact the automobile had on the culture and physical fabric of small towns in Iowa during the early 20th century. Located on a Main Street corner of the Lincoln Highway, the first coast-to-coast highway in the nation, this little hotel was among the first of a number of downtown Lowden businesses eventually established to serve the automobile trade and traveler.

When the first transcontinental automobile crossing was made in 1903—a 63-day trip from San Francisco to New York—most roads in Iowa were unimproved dirt wagon roads running along section lines. Roads to and from Iowa's small towns were intended to serve the local farmers' need of transporting crops and livestock to market by getting them to the nearby towns' railroad stations. Most communities were best linked to each other through their rail connections. If one needed to travel beyond one's hometown, one usually did it by rail rather than by dirt road.

Iowa's sorry roads—dusty in the summer and quagmires of sucking mud in the spring—were particularly daunting for non-local travelers. There were few directional or locational signs, and few guarantees of readily available gasoline or lodging. Yet the demand for good roads and for services geared to auto tourists was growing in response to Americans' lust for cross-country trips.

What cross-country travelers needed were established routes that identified and linked existing dirt roads. Ambitiously labeled

"highways," these routes usually jogged along right-angle section lines and through towns. Years later, some would be paved as main routes, and shortcuts would be devised that ignored Iowa's grid system. But early highway boosters had to look first to existing transportation routes—and they found one through Lowden.

The Yankee Run stream runs past Lowden, cutting a diagonal swath to the southeast as it drains the surrounding floodplain and heads towards the Mississippi. The upland ridges on either side of Yankee Run rise a hundred or more feet, making the low, flat prairie in between a natural transportation corridor. Early wagon roads followed Yankee Run, and so did the Chicago, Iowa and Nebraska Railroad Company when it was built in 1857. Renamed the Chicago & North Western (CNW) in 1864, the railroad was able to build double tracks through the county and Lowden by 1891 because of this flat, accommodating terrain.

This natural transportation

corridor through Lowden was one of many considered by the leaders of the Lincoln Highway Association as a likely route through Iowa. Henry B. Joy, former president of Packard Motor Car Company, originator of the name for the Lincoln Highway, and first president of the highway association, selected the route. "Joy had traveled back and forth across Iowa at least ten times in five years. He felt that there were as many as fifty possible routes across the state," Drake Hokanson writes in *The Lincoln Highway: Main Street across America*. "They were all about equal in length . . . but they also were uniformly unimproved and tended to zigzag all over the map following a haphazard arrangement of section-line roads. . . ."

"The route Joy selected between Chicago and Omaha had little significance as a through road prior to the coming of the automobile," Hokanson continues. "It was by no means a standout among poor options. What pulled Joy to this route was simply that it

**T**he early Lincoln Highway paralleled the CNW Railroad. Trains still speed by today, but this abandoned stretch of the Lincoln near Lowden carries no traffic.



PHOTO BY JAN OLIVE NASH



had grown to be the route of common usage. Long before any Lincoln Highway markers went up, this path had been used by people traveling cross-country in automobiles [including the first auto crossing of the continent in 1903, and the New York to Paris Race in 1908]. . . . By the time Henry Joy came looking for his Lincoln Highway route, the Iowa portion had been dubbed the Iowa Official Trans-Continental Route."

The *Lowden News* confirms that the town saw its share of Trans-Continental Route travelers. For example, on September 12, 1913, the paper reported: "Yesterday after filling the tank of a large touring car at the corner of H. L. Deichmann's Store, the chauffeur cranked the engine without setting the brake and the machine started backwards, crossed the street and climbed the two and half foot embankment just missing the large tree on the C. F. Richmann place. The lady in the back was not injured."

With the September 1914 announcement that the Lincoln Highway would run through Lowden, the newspaper editor roused local citizens: "A meeting will be held in every town along the Transcontinental Highway in Iowa on the night of October 31st to ratify the selection of it as the Lincoln Highway across the state. . . . Every town from coast to coast has been requested to hold meetings and as Lowden is in a very important position on the route plans should be made by some of our road boosters for this meeting."

Although backers of the Lincoln Highway originally tried to raise \$10 million for improvements to the highway, that idea eventually was scaled back to paving "seedling miles" of con-

crete and promoting the highway in other ways. One was the marker program. "At the encouragement of the [Lincoln Highway] association, civic groups, business people, and general citizenry from communities along the route fanned out to paint Lincoln Highway markers in patriotic red, white, and blue stripes on barns, trees, rocks, telephone poles, and fence posts," Hokanson explains. "What the marking job lacked in standardization or neatness it made up in enthusiasm. Anybody lucky enough to live or do business along the Lincoln Highway was proud of the fact." The markers, along with published guides and maps, would keep the wayward traveler on the jigs and jags now christened the Lincoln Highway.

In Lowden, a traveler heading



COURTESY OF SUE LIGHT



**Top, from left: Vera, Beatrice, and Celia Clemmens on the Lincoln Hotel porch. Inset: A. F. "Frank" Clemmens.**

to California on the new Lincoln Highway would turn right at the corner of Main and Clinton Streets, jogging north and leaving town before ever getting to the main business district. And at this jog in the route, Celia Daehn Clemmens took advantage of the opportunity offered by an empty



corner lot. On March 1, 1915, Celia's husband, A. F. Clemmens, purchased the lot.

With the Lincoln Highway route announced and California's Panama-Pacific International Exposition pulling adventurous auto travelers westward, Celia Clemmens no doubt knew that once the Iowa mud dried, the trickle of auto travelers through Lowden would increase dramatically, and these travelers—midway between Clinton and Cedar Rapids—would be looking for food and lodging. Working with builder Emil Mahlstedt, the Clemmenses had no time to waste. Excavation for their new

Lincoln Hotel commenced immediately, despite Iowa's notorious March mud.

Opening for business on June 17, 1915, the Lincoln Hotel offered rooms for \$2 per night and steak dinners for 75 cents. The next day the *Lowden News* pronounced it "one of the finest buildings in the town" and predicted that, "situated as it is on the main corner of the Lincoln Highway, it will no doubt receive good patronage."

To further their hotel's association with the highway, a few days later the Clemmenses placed an ad in the newspaper featuring a picture of the Lincoln Highway

Association pennant that association members were to display on their automobiles as they traveled.

The Clemmenses' daughter Vera remembers living in the family's quarters and helping with the noon meals that drew not only hotel guests—she remembers them mostly as tourists and "traveling men"—but locals, too. On occasion, the big dining room would be used for special events, such as the local firemen's banquet.

Emily Post, author of etiquette books and writer for *Collier's* magazine, was in one of the estimated five to ten thousand autos that traveled the Lincoln Highway in 1915 to the California exposition. Coming west from New York, Post certainly must have driven through Lowden. She told her readers: "Every town through the Middle West seems to have a little grill of brick-paved streets; a splendid post-office building of stone or brick or marble; a courthouse, but of an older period generally; and one or two moving picture houses; two or three important-looking dry-goods stores, and some sort of hotel, and in it a lot of drummers [traveling salesmen] in tilted-back chairs exhibiting the soles of their shoes to the street."

Sheltered by a wide porch supported by Tuscan columns, the Lincoln Hotel's front door opened into the lobby, beyond which were the guests' parlor and dining room, and the Clemmenses' living quarters. A dogleg staircase of yellow pine rose from the lobby to the second-floor central hall, where doors opened into a dozen guest rooms.

**A** stretch of abandoned Lincoln Highway a mile west of Lowden reveals the narrowness of the paved road.



PHOTO BY JAN OLIVE NASH





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One hand resting on a Quaker State Motor Oil sign, August L. Kreinbring in white uniform and bow tie beams in this photo sent as his 1938 Christmas greeting. In 1934 Kreinbring opened this Tudor Revival-style Phillips 66 gas station two blocks east of the Lincoln Hotel, on a prominent corner near where westbound highway traffic zigzagged onto Main Street. The photograph reveals much about 1930s auto travel and Lowden's roadside architecture. To the right, gasoline pumps in a tidy filling station stand ready to serve motorists. To the left is a park area that is obviously a part of the filling station—and a forerunner of today's rest areas. A grassy lawn, picnic table, and rock-bordered flower beds entice weary travelers to stop and enjoy a cold Orange Crush or Coca-Cola. (The Coca-Cola sign is, in fact, the largest commercial sign visible.) Kreinbring also fashioned rock sculptures and a cannon out of oil cans to decorate the park. The station still stands, though the highway has passed it by and the rest area has been replaced by a concrete-block service bay and a small house.

The hotel's modest style was born of function and commercial necessity, but the shallow-pitched hipped roof, wide overhangs, and heavily textured, buff-colored stucco also reveal the influence of Prairie School architecture as it was often interpreted by local builders. These vaguely Prairiesque features furthered its commercial attractiveness and projected a modern, up-to-date appearance. Part of the Lincoln Hotel's local historical significance today is that it is one of a very few buildings in Lowden, and likely the only commercial building in town, to have been influenced by the Prairie School style of architecture.

But more significant, the Lincoln Hotel marks the transition in traveler accommodations from ex-

isting railroad hotels to the soon-to-come motor courts and tourist cabins. Like America's earlier railroad hotels, the Lincoln Hotel was located near the center of town rather than in the countryside, and it offered meals to the traveler and town resident alike. But like the later motor courts and tourist cabins that would dot American highways in the 1920s, the Lincoln Hotel was built to attract automobile travelers and soon became neighbor to a variety of new businesses that located nearby in order to attract tourist dollars.

When the Clemmenses built the Lincoln Hotel, a large livery stable was behind the lot, still serving horse-drawn transportation. But across the street was Lowden's first auto garage, owned by the Kemmann family.

Like Celia and A. F. Clemmens, the Kemmanns had been quick to spot the trend towards automobile travel—but then they'd been in the transportation business for some time. H. D. Kemmann had arrived from Germany in 1875 to operate a blacksmith's shop. Together with his sons, he had expanded the business to include selling buggies, surreys, and farm implements. By 1912, they began selling Marathon cars, adding Ford cars in 1913, Case in 1914, Overland in 1915, Chalmers in 1916, and finally, Chevrolet in 1923.

Finding gasoline in Lowden would not have been difficult for overnight tourists at the Lincoln Hotel; just as travel lodging was evolving in response to auto tourists, so was gasoline distribution.



Historian Kenneth Jackson traces five stages in the evolution of service stations, and the changes in Lowden echo those early stages. "The first stage was clearly the worst for the motorist, who had to buy fuel by the bucketful at a livery stable, repair shop, or dry goods store" and pour it through a funnel into the tank, a messy and sometimes dangerous maneuver, Jackson writes. The second stage (1905-1920) began with the invention of an inverted gasoline storage tank and pump for directly fueling the automobile. These single-pump "filling stations" were often operated by retail stores, at the curb right outside the stores. By 1920, the third stage, service stations provided "under one roof all the functions of gasoline distribution and normal automotive maintenance," Jackson says. "These full-service structures were often built in the form of little colonial houses, Greek temples, Chinese pagodas, and Art Deco palaces. Many were local landmarks and a source of community pride." (By 1935, the fourth stage, the standardized "corporate look" gas station would take over, but by the fifth stage, in the 1970s, these would be replaced by major oil companies' "super stations" and locally owned "mini-mart" convenience stores.)

In Lowden, some residents recall the town's pharmacist selling the first gasoline, but by 1915 the general mercantile store, Freund's, sold gasoline, too—as well as Buicks. Single-purpose filling stations eventually opened to compete with Freund's. In the 1920s Kemmanns replaced their blacksmith shop across the street from the Lincoln Hotel with a Standard station, and the Victorian house next door was replaced by Gade's

Garage, with a gas pump and a mechanic on duty. By the late 1930s three more gas stations would open within three blocks of the hotel.

In the mid-1920s the Lincoln Highway was re-routed. Instead of turning north at the Lincoln Hotel, it now continued straight past the hotel down Clinton Street. Though this meant no loss of visibility for the hotel, it did bring the highway traffic through the heart of the original 19th-century commercial district.

Anticipating the new route, the town renamed its streets in 1924. Clinton Street, the east/west corridor through town, became Main Street. The former north/south Main Street became Washington Street. When the new route—which included a rural segment west of town—was opened in December 1925, the town paper boasted, "The new re-located Lincoln highway west of town was officially opened this week. The new road is much better than the old highway, and the distance is shorter. There are ruts in it but they are not so deep as those on the old highway."

In the same decade Celia Clemmens increased the family's living quarters with a small ground-floor addition. She managed to keep the hotel operating through the Great Depression, but once widowed she finally sold it in 1946. A series of owners contin-

ued to operate the hotel until 1981, although by the mid-1950s, a new section of Highway 30, as the Lincoln Highway was then numbered, had been completed south of Lowden. It bypassed the town and diverted all but local traffic away from the hotel. An ad for the hotel in the town's centennial publication indicates that by 1957, rooms could be rented on a nightly or weekly basis. The hotel's slow conversion to residential housing had begun.

After sitting vacant and deteriorating from water leaks for a dozen years, the hotel was purchased and rehabilitated in 1994 and 1995 by Sue Licht and Brad Norton of Lincolnway Hotel, Inc., and converted to apartments. The public lobby was reduced in size, and several upstairs hallway doors were eliminated. The small rear wing added by Clemmens in the 1920s was removed, and a third rear door and ramp were added for a ground-floor, handicapped-accessible apartment.

Because the exterior stucco was too water-damaged to repair, new stucco of matching color and texture was applied using the original technique. The sagging and rotting front porch was dismantled and rebuilt. New wood storm windows were fabricated to fit in the original window frames, and the original sashes and panes were carefully preserved. New asphalt shingles replaced rolled

**Years of water damage required tearing off old stucco down to the wood sheathing, and rebuilding the front porch.**

BOTH PHOTOS COURTESY OF SUE LIGHT







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**N**ow rehabilitated and converted to apartments, Lowden's Lincoln Hotel sits proudly as a reminder of the decades when the Lincoln Highway wound through Iowa's small towns, bringing weary travelers to local businesses in search of food, rest, and auto repairs.

asphalt roofing paper, which had been simply tarred at the seams.

The project benefited from two grants—from Iowa's Resource Enhancement and Protection Act-Historic Resources Development Program; and from Home Funds (Housing and Urban Development funds available through the Iowa Department of Economic Development) as one of their first preservation projects that also created low- and medium-income housing.

Now in excellent condition and fully occupied by tenants, the building exemplifies adaptive reuse of a historically significant building. (Because the building is now private residential space, the interior is no longer accessible to

the public.) In 1996, the Lincoln Hotel was listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and won the residential Preservation At Its Best Award from the Iowa Historic Preservation Alliance.

Clearly, Lowden's physical environment was changed with the coming of the automobile and the Lincoln Highway. The Lincoln

Hotel stands as a reminder of early travelers who chose the independence and adventure of their own automobiles over the smoother, faster, and surer transportation of the trains. ♦

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#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Much is owed to Drake Hokanson for his lucid text on pre-World War I rural Iowa and its road systems in his *The Lincoln Highway: Main Street across America* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988). His descriptions of setting and context paint a picture in words to complement his photos. Other useful sources were Rebecca Conard, "The Lincoln Highway in Greene County, Iowa," NRHP Multiple Property Documentation Form (1992), adapted for publication in *The Annals of Iowa* (Fall 1993); Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Jan Jennings, ed. *Roadside America: The Automobile in Design and Culture* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990); Tania G. Werbizky, "Accommodating the Traveler: The Development of Tourist Courts along US Route 20 in New York State," in *Preserving the Recent Past*, Deborah Slaton and Rebecca A. Shiffer, eds., II 41-52 (Washington, D.C.: Historic Preservation Education Foundation, 1995); and Lincoln Highway Association, *The Complete Official Road Guide of the Lincoln Highway, 1916* (Detroit: Lincoln Highway Association, 1916; Pleiades Press reprint, 1984). Also helpful were the author's personal communication with Bob Ausberger, Lincoln Highway Association president, and photos and interview from Vera Clemmens Koch to Sue Licht. Local sources include the *Lowden News* (1913-1928), and Lowden Historical Society holdings: *Lowden Centennial 1857-1957* (Lowden Centennial Comm., 1957); *The Northeastern Cedar County Post 75th Anniversary Edition, 1857-1932* (10 Oct. 1932); *We Remember When . . . Our Tribute to America's Bicentennial* (Lowden: Lowden Historical Society, 1976); "Lowden Historical Society 1987" (typescript); 1914 Sanborn fire insurance map; and pertinent photos. Emily Post's travels are described in *Collier's* (Sept. 11, 1915); and her *By Motor to the Golden Gate* (Appleton, 1917). This article was adapted from a National Register for Historic Places nomination form by Jan R. Nash, Tallgrass Historians L.C. Annotations are in the *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* files.