

The Keokuk Lantern Club

Monday evening, October 19, 1908, was a typical early fall night, and the people of Keokuk were enjoying their leisure hours at home or at their accustomed tasks, when, at 8:10 o'clock the autumn stillness was broken by the noise of a terrific explosion. On its heels those homes which were lighted by electricity were suddenly plunged into darkness, commercial power stuttered and stopped, and the street lights went out as if some giant had suddenly cupped them in his hand. It was evident that the explosion had something to do with the Keokuk Electric Light and Power Plant, located beside the old Des Moines Rapids Canal at the foot of North Twelfth Street. News of the disaster spread rapidly and "sent chills through the veins of many of Keokuk's people who rushed quickly to the scene".

A giant fly wheel attached to one of the generators in the electric plant had exploded, killing one man who was attempting to reach the master switch to control the racing monster of steel and iron. Another employee escaped injury miraculously. A serio-comic note was injected into the news story by the reporter who wrote that a family

of four living in a house four hundred feet from the plant narrowly escaped annihilation when a five hundred pound piece of the fly wheel crashed through the roof "rudely interrupting them while undressing for bed." Describing the accident in its edition the following day, the *Gate City* said it was "a terrific accident unparalleled in the City of Keokuk".

Power lines throughout the city were completely knocked out, halting street car and inter-urban traffic, and "many homes were forced to bring oil lamps and other lights into use", the reporter related. The explosion of the fly wheel carried out a wall of the plant and caused damage to the electrical equipment there of over seven thousand dollars. A. D. Ayres in a statement to the newspapers warned that there would be no restoration of arc street lights for some time, but that power for private companies would be restored as soon as possible. This lack of street lights, plus a clever bit of newspaper work on the part of two members of the *Gate City's* staff, brought the announcement in big headlines:

"LANTERN CLUB IS ORGANIZED.

"Everybody Join.

"It costs nothing.

"You don't have to register.

"Don't let your light shine under a bushel".

These were the eye-catching sentences of the news story that had a prominent place in the issue of the *Gate City* three days after the accident. The article went on to say, "The Keokuk Lantern Club is hereby organized and new members solicited. There is no initiation fee and no dues". Under the heading, "by-laws", the public was informed that "the Keokuk Lantern Club shall exist from this day until the electric street lights are in commission" and the object of the club was described as "the enlightenment of mankind at night, on the streets of Keokuk."

Would-be members of the club were admonished to take the following pledge:

"I hereby promise on my honor as a citizen of Keokuk to hang out a lighted lantern in front of my residence each night (except when the moon is shining) and keep the lantern lighted and hung out until at least midnight from now until the street lights are in commission".

Several classes of membership were offered. The "people with incandescent lights on the porch" who would turn these on at night were to be known as "honorary members". Those who lived on the corner of a street and would hang out lanterns were to be known as "star members" while those who lived in the middle of the block were designated as "active members". A member-

ship ticket was printed in a "box" accompanying the article. It read as follows:

"This is to certify that.....
is a member of the Keokuk Lantern Club, having signed the pledge and agreed to stand by it.

Jack O. Lantern, President
Oil Kann, Secretary."

In a subsequent article a "strange co-incidence" was noted. On October 21, 1858, the files of the *Gate City* disclosed that the streets of Keokuk were in darkness, the gas supply being shut off for an hour. The failure of these gas lights lasted for a week, it reported, because "the retorts had been taken out of the plant". This darkening of the streets "every fifty years" led to a fanciful prophesy of "dark streets fifty years hence in October of 1958."

Doings of the Lantern Club continued to make interesting reading for many nights subsequent to the printing of the first article, and names of the citizens who were joining the club by hanging out lighted lanterns were printed each night. "Charter members made a good showing last night", said the *Gate City* of October 23, 1908. The writer added: "one would be surprised at the great quantity of light that an ordinary oil lantern hung in the street can make." Charter members of the club cited in the article were L. A. Hamill, 704

Franklin Street; J. T. Hubinger, 822 Blondeau Street; I. S. Ackley, 1007 Blondeau Street; Dr. A. B. Hughes and Dr. Charles A. Jenkins on the south side of town; and The Keokuk Truth, 917 High Street. The appointment of a "light inspector" was said to be imminent.

This inspector's first report appeared in the *Gate City* of October 24th. "The Lantern Club is doing fine. Between Ninth and Tenth on High a member has a lantern hanging from a bracket attached to a shade tree". This inspector also reported that "Mayor [W. E.] Strimback has joined and is lighting up the upper end of the Third Ward", also "that Ex-Marshal Charles Henneman has a lantern that is helping illuminate one of the south side streets". It was announced that the charter would be kept open for signatures one more day. In the issue appearing on the final day for signatures of charter members, October 26th, it was stated that "The Lantern Club is booming, five hundred names by tonight." D. L. Hughes, manager of the Keokuk Opera House, drew praise for having "turned on a dozen lights at the Opera House."

Startling news appeared in the issue of the paper on Monday, October 27th. "What do you think of this?", the startled reader was asked, "The Board of Directors has expelled one member

for conduct unbecoming a gentleman. He kept his lantern burning for four nights, but put it out last night because a neighbor refused to light a lantern." Naturally there was much speculation as to the identity of the expelled member. As if to offset this scandal in the club three honorary members who switched on incandescent lights were listed as "S. F. Baker & Co., John Leisy and the Scott Manufacturing Company".

Taking a dig at the rival newspaper, the *Constitution Democrat*, the Lantern Club historian remarked the following night, a "hearty vote of thanks" is extended the *Constitution Democrat* for "its assistance". This bit of sarcasm was levelled at the following tardy notice from the pen of its rival — "it is suggested that if citizens would display lanterns at their homes during the period of deprivation of arc street lighting at night it would prove much of a convenience to everybody".

This hanging of lanterns became so widespread throughout the city that the optimistic representatives of the Lantern Club reported that several streets were as "light as day". The Club also warned that lantern thieves were busy and suggested that home owners mark their lanterns by scratching their initials and street number on the metal base of the beacons. "The Board of Direc-

tors" rose to the emergency and offered a reward of \$100 for the capture of thieves caught stealing lanterns.

Formation of "Branch No. 1 at Montrose Iowa", Keokuk's neighbor up the river, was also announced with appropriate fanfare.

An up-to-the-minute history of the club appeared in the *Gate City* of October 31st, when practically a full page story captioned "The Famous Keokuk Lantern Club" appeared, headed by the boast that "never, no never, has there been such a popular organization as the Keokuk Lantern Club, organized but a few days ago and in which membership numbers five hundred". This lusty infant was announced as having 17 members on Friday, 44 on Saturday, 150 on Monday, 236 on Tuesday, 321 on Wednesday, 345 on Thursday, 350 on Friday, "and tonight five hundred". It was in this page spread that the paternity of the club was divulged.

"At first", it was stated, "its efforts were taken as a joke, but as the really beneficial help the club became is seen, smiles died down and everybody joined hands".

It was really no surprise to those who had been reading the articles to learn that "the truth is, there are no officers. The work has been carried on by two members of the Gate City force". Any

one familiar with his style of writing had long since made up his mind that the guiding genius of the hoax was Edward F. Carter, then city editor of the *Gate City*. Mr. Carter readily admitted that the club was his idea, and its development was proof of his versatility in the line of humorous writing.

Despite the glimpse backstage, the fun was carried further the next week by a call for the election of officers of the Lantern Club. It was also stated that since the "moon is on the job now, it will soon be so strong lanterns will not be necessary". However, the club was advised that on the waning of this moon it should again be ready to function. Promise of the restoration of street lights with the installation of new machinery for the light plant started journalistic speculation shortly as to when the club would disband.

Publication of the election results in the club appeared to rival in interest the closing days of the presidential campaign of 1908. For president of the club the vote was declared a tie between "Judge Bell", Rice H. Bell, judge of the Superior Court, and L. A. Hamill. Other successful officers were Edward F. Carter, for vice president; Harry Brunat, secretary; and Claude Townsend, treasurer. Walter Garrison was winner of the post of light inspector. A. B. Hughes was chosen attor-

ney and B. C. Cook became auditor. Club members were advised at this time to "clean up their lanterns" and meet next week to set a new date for displaying them.

Fame of the club spread outside of Keokuk, when Walter C. Kiedaisch, a former Keokukian, and an artist for the Erie, Pennsylvania, *Times*, drew and published a cartoon about the club. This appeared in the issue of the *Gate City* of November 13th, along with the announcement that "lanterns are again on duty". Two weeks later, however, the electric company announced restoration of arc street light service about December 12th. This led the club's historian to suggest that the club should disband. Early in December it was proposed to have a banquet and committees were named for the event, which was to have been held in a large hall decorated with lanterns. Tickets of admission were to be twenty-five cents. The banquet, however, was never held. Indeed Mr. Carter reports that the members of the Lantern Club never had a meeting for any purpose.

A resolution asking the city fathers to appropriate \$500 "to the club for its excellent public work" drew a chuckle from readers — even from the city fathers themselves. On December 12th it was announced that street car service would be resumed in Keokuk together with arc street lighting on December 16th.

The obituary of the club appeared in the issue of the *Gate City* for December 18th, with the statement, "The Keokuk Lantern Club is no more". An official resolution of demise stating that "the Keokuk Lantern Club is officially disbanded, dissolved, broke, busted and wiped off the map" ended its activities. Still in a humorous vein the author of the article declared that the resolution was "held up for thirty minutes while the arc lights were watched to see if they would perform without a flicker". This they did and the resolution was spread on the minutes of the club.

What started as a bit of journalistic horse play was carried out as a community enterprise and proved to be of no small benefit to the citizens of Keokuk in keeping their streets at least partly lighted in the emergency and helping to keep down such petty crimes as amateur hold-ups and purse snatching which might easily have flourished in darkened streets.

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