

IOWA HISTORY



Photo Courtesy Library of Congress
An old hitching post

No Hitching Posts, No Business

Farmers in the Charles City area threatened to take their business to neighboring towns if the Improvement Association removed the hitching posts in the city park. But the 45 women who had formed the new association in 1903 weren't about to back down. Before long the hitching posts were gone and only a fading memory.

The hitching post removal had been a hard-fought victory for the women, but it was only one of many improvements they planned for the town over the next ten years. Number one on the list was to beautify the city's only public park. Where there were old board walks and cinder paths, the women persuaded the city council to construct cement sidewalks. The leaky drinking fountain in the center of the park created a mud hole and became a target. The unsanitary old tin cup attached by a rusty chain had to go.

Raising money to fund the improvements with rummage sales, concerts, dances and membership dues, the ladies laid out a plan of action. Turning their attention to the courthouse square, they installed lights and seats set in cement foundations. Rubbish cans were scattered throughout the downtown. Because the town was laid out on a bias, there were numerous triangular lots at street intersections. Most were overgrown, littered with tin cans and full of ashes from coal stoves. The ladies oversaw the mowing and planting of flowers in these plots.

Next the ladies tackled unsightly billboards in the city. One business owner was convinced to remove an ugly tobacco sign from his storefront. He dramatically complied by climbing his roof with a hatchet and hacking the sign down. Another objectionable sign stood near the riverfront; one night someone saw the sign floating down the river, and no one asked how it happened.

Pledge cards and 800 flower seed packets were distributed in the school. Kids pledged to stop throwing paper and other trash on the city streets. And in the spring they participated in cleanup days, scattering the flower seeds in vacant lots.

The local newspaper encouraged anti-littering practices by publishing a list of dumping locations. A new bandstand was built with \$500 raised by the women. They contributed \$80 for the installation of a cement sidewalk to the cemetery. They planned to showcase the river winding through the city by constructing sidewalks and steps to the river's edge. A plot of land by the swinging bridge that was used as a dump was cleaned up and 45 varieties of wild flowers were planted.

Local business owners helped raise money for the Improvement Association. The moving picture theater owner offered half of one night's profits. The druggist donated 40 per cent of the soda fountain profits one day.

It's assumed the local farmers, who had threatened to take their business to other towns, continued to shop in Charles City. It's unclear how they dealt with their horses.

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Sources

- Floyd County Historical Museum, www.floydcountymuseum.org
- *History of Floyd County, Iowa*, Chicago: Inter-States Publishing Co., 1882.
- "Women at Charles City Are Prominent at City Improvement," *Des Moines Register*, May 25, 1913.