

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### BOISE ELECTRIC PLANT

Number 492

1977

About the beginning of September 1886, F. M. McMillan of Portland came to Boise to promote an electric light venture. Electric lights had been installed at the Philadelphia smelter in Ketchum four years before, and a progressive city was expected to provide modern new conveniences when they became available. Lighting with kerosene could not compare with electricity, so within a month a group of twenty prominent business and community leaders agreed to form a company and underwrite half the cost of this \$10,000 venture. When the company was organized on October 4, the lighting system promised to offer great advertising benefits for the community. Each subscriber promised to supply \$250, while McMillan brought in the other \$5,000. They planned to bring water from the Ridenbaugh Canal (already being used to run a flour mill and a saw mill) to the edge of the bench across the Boise River from the city. There they would install a generator capable of meeting initial demand. Three hundred customers contracted for service to ensure a reasonable return on the original \$10,000 investment. Necessary equipment was scheduled to arrive on October 20 and the system was scheduled to be completed yet that year.

Work progressed rapidly late in the fall of 1886. W. H. Ridenbaugh utilized a large force of men to provide a stabilizing reservoir on the bench, and equipment necessary for the project finally was scheduled for shipment from Chicago shortly before Christmas, but nothing ever arrived. Failure of McMillan's company--the Sperry Electric Light Company of Chicago--disrupted the enterprise entirely. McMillan's contract called for service

to begin March 26, 1887, but he had to request an extension since work on the actual plant had not commenced. At this point the original company (controlled by original investors) rejected McMillan's proposal as too expensive. They disbanded in order to exclude him from future participation in the enterprise.

Organizing a new firm--the Capitol Electric Light, Motor, and Gas Company--they decided to start with a \$2,500 plant instead. In the middle of April they got S. Z. Mitchell, F. H. Sparling, and a New York concern to provide their plant. They had to spend two months getting the poles and wires up and their equipment installed. Although they planned to turn on their power July 2, they finally managed to start Boise's electric light system on July 4 as part of a magnificent Independence Day celebration. With a plant almost a mile from their service area, they had an operation about as advanced as any for technology of that time. Long distance transmission did not commence until four years later, when a four-mile line went into service for a water power system at Telluride, Colorado. By that time, Boise had an electric street car system in operation.