

Historical Society of Pottawattamie County

Carla Borgaila and Ed Ritchie spoke about the Squirrel Cage Jail and the Railswest Railroad Museum at the Treynor Optimist Club on October 22. Ed is the administrator and Carla is from the historical society.

This is the first winter the jail and railroad museum will be open. They will be open Wednesday through Sunday with limited hours. Actual open hours are available on their website, thehistoricalsociety.org/

The jail was one of the first with running water. The water ran from the top to the bottom. The original cost was \$28,200, but it would cost about \$1 million today.

The only full-time paid staff was the jailor and his wife. They hired large guards to intimidate the prisoners. In the 1920s, it cost \$50,000 for all the paid staff for the jail for the year. Today jails costs about \$50,000 per inmate.

There were 18 similar jails built, but only three are left. The one in Council Bluffs is the only three story squirrel cage jail left. There was one in Witchita, Kansas that was probably three stories, but it was torn down.

The cells are not very tall and not very roomy. The cells are 8 feet on the outside, but since it is a circular jail, they are very narrow in the center. There are ten cells on each level. The jail was used only for men. Its use ended in 1969.

In 2008 the jail and museum had 50 school tours. This year there were 6 or 7. The State of Iowa ruled in 2009 that students could not be asked to pay for tours, so now the school must pay the entire bill. In a normal year, about 7000 people tour the jail and railroad museum.