

## OUR NEIGHBORHOOD

Books about corporate history tend often to be somewhat narrow in their focus, but why not? After all, they're supposed to paint a rosy company picture and be more of a keepsake for employees and their families than a major historical document. But that's not the case in the recently published history of Indiana Gas Company, published by the company and written by Bill Beck of Indianapolis.

One reason is Beck himself. A competent corporate and institutional researcher, he also did the history of Methodist Hospital in Indianapolis. Having done a 60-year history of Ball Memorial Hospital in the late 1980s, I can identify with that; there are scads of records to be perused and people to interview. Further, Beck has an apparent affection for detail and writes about people and events in a way that brings them to life.

The other reason is the topic. Artificial gas manufactured from coal and water helped fuel the industrial revolution in the United States through most of the 19th century, and the growth of the state of Indiana was a distinct beneficiary of the technology.

Then, as Beck points out, the discovery of natural gas in Western Ohio and East Central Indiana in the 1880s sparked and fed an economic boom whose

**Bill  
SPURGEON**



impact remains felt more than 100 years later.

In the first years of its corporate life Indiana Gas Company did not serve Muncie. That opportunity lay with Central Indiana Gas Company, a firm whose corporate headquarters were in East Central Indiana and which at one time in its history was controlled by the Dawes family of Chicago. (Charles G. Dawes was U.S. vice president 1925-29 during Calvin Coolidge's presidency, and he later served President Herbert C. Hoover as ambassador to the Court of St. James's [Great Britain].)

Central Indiana Gas Co. gets its share of the spotlight in Beck's book. The firm dates to 1911 and was an amalgamation of other gas companies that served Muncie and nearby communities. Muncie had a plant that manufactured gas as early as the 1870s (like many other utilities of its time, it was financed and controlled by Pennsylvania capitalists). Then a bunch of natural gas drilling and distribution companies came along after the discovery of gas underneath this part of the state a few years later.

*Natural Gas for the Hoosier State* traces the history of Indiana Gas Co. from its formation in 1945, when it took over the gas manufacturing and distribution facilities of Indiana Public Service Co. The latter firm also generated and distributed electricity, operated water companies and ran electric interurban railroad lines.

These facts underline the diversity of utility operation in Indiana in the first half of the 20th century, and

in documenting them Beck weaves into the corporate histories the rich heritage of the companies and the folks who operated them.

The title is appropriate in another way. Indiana Gas Co. Inc. operates in more than a score of counties in Central and Southeastern Indiana, serving dozens of communities and nearby rural areas.

East Central Indiana residents will recognize the names of many of the people about whom Beck has written. They include E.R. (Buzz) Elliott who served as vice president and general manager of Central Indiana Gas Co. William R. Johnson and William A. Reynolds are others mentioned for their role in assimilating and operating the new acquisition. Others significant in the long life of Central Indiana Gas are absent, but it needs to be remembered that this is a history of Indiana Gas Co., and the acquisition of the local firm came late in its life.

Having laid the historical groundwork of gas manufacture, discovery and distribution in the early years of the 20th century, Beck relates how the company was founded as Indiana Gas & Water Co. at the end of World War II, to operate gas and water properties formerly owned by Public Service Indiana.

The company's history is one of acquisitions and expansions but also of divestitures; in the late 1960s the water properties were sold and the company got the Indiana Gas Co. name.

The 1970s marked the acquisition of Central Indiana Gas Co. from the Detroit-based holding company

which then controlled it, and the decade also was marked by shortages of gas during bitter winters of 1977 and 1978.

The story of how the company coped with this shortage is told, and it's noted that in the bitter mid-winter months of 1994, there were no significant problems either with supplies or transmission.

Beck tells the stories of some of the key individuals in the firm's development and success: Duane Amundson, Larry Ferger, J.W. Heiney and John Kavanagh receive prominent mention for their roles in the firm's development.

The author does a good job of joining the various aspects of operating a successful, publicly-held utility company (the firm's stock was listed on the New York Stock Exchange in 1970). The era in which manufactured gas supplanted natural gas supplies is covered, as are regulatory activities of federal and state governments. Covered, too, are pipelines and storage facilities, and the employees who maintain the huge "plant" that brings to homes and businesses a fuel that we tend to take for granted.

Beck's book might be described as "semi-technical." It gives enough information to satisfy the serious student of the business and yet it is written so the reader without technical knowledge can understand it — and be fascinated with the company and its complexity. Illustrations are abundant, a reflection of the company, its people, its communities and its customers.

■ **Wiley W. (Bill) Spurgeon of Muncie is a contributing writer to Our Neighborhood.**

# 1996-03-12 Bill Beck's book about IGC and CIG



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