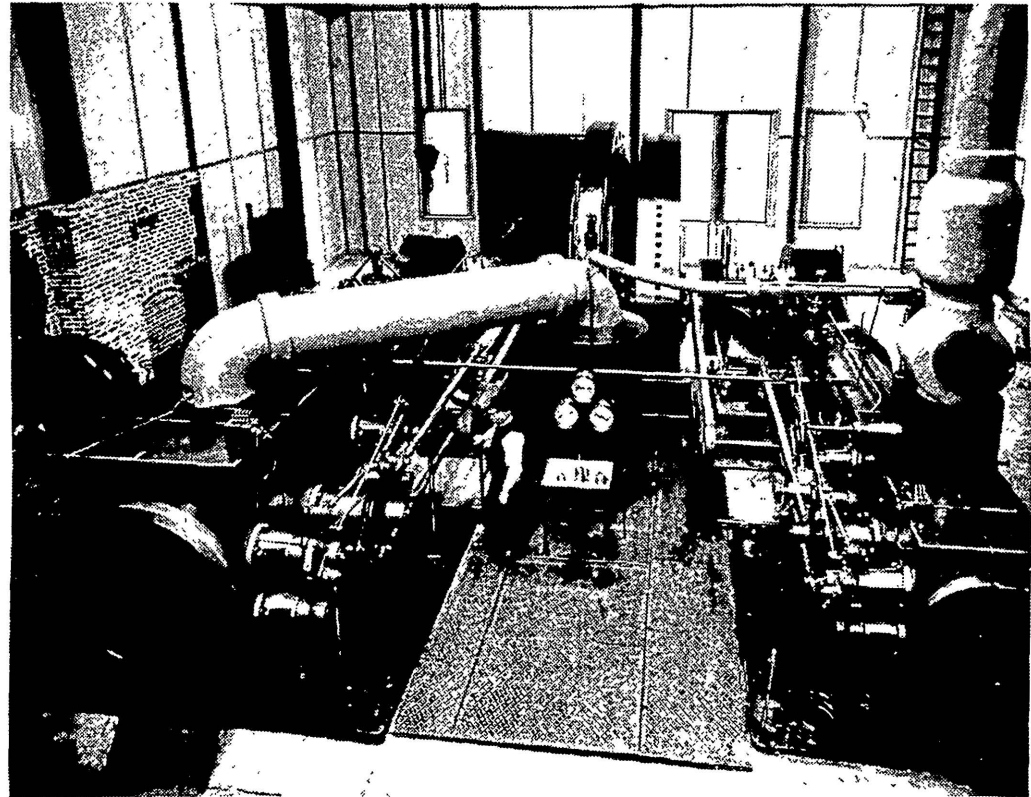




The Van Buren steam plant, which has provided Topeka electricity and steam heat since 1888, will

cease operations this month as its last customer, the State Office Building, converts to a new system.

Local steam plant to close down

One of Topeka's oldest business landmarks will cease operations this month when KPL Gas Service officially closes its Van Buren Street steam plant. Closing of the plant, built in 1888, brings to an end nearly a century of service to Topeka.

Rick Toland, KPL Gas Service Topeka district manager, said the 220-foot tall stack on the ground of the steam plant will be dismantled this summer. On the property, located on the southeast corner of 7th and Van Buren, is a large brick building which houses boilers, water storage tanks and other equipment needed for producing steam, fuel tanks and an outdoor electrical substation. The company will continue using the substation to provide electricity to the downtown area until a new substation is completed at 4th and Van Buren. Future plans for the Van Buren facilities and site have not been determined.

Toland said the plant originally was built to provide electricity for Topeka's electric street railway system, and more recently supplied steam heat for many downtown businesses, including the State Capitol and State Office Building.

"The Van Buren steam plant played an important role in providing electricity and heat to downtown Topeka for many years," said Toland. "But, it simply became too costly to keep the old system of underground steam pipes operating efficiently. With new technology, there are better and more economical ways to supply heat."

He said the fuel costs and maintenance costs associated with the operation of those old pipes as well as the age of the equipment at the steam plant, were major factors in phasing out the plant.

KPL Gas Service began advising customers in the late 1970s that the

plant had outlived its economic usefulness. The State Office Building is the last customer on the steam system. When the State begins the operation of its newly constructed central heating plant on the grounds of the State Office Building this spring, steam heat from the Van Buren plant no longer will be needed.

Toland said the Van Buren plant was built in 1888 by the Edison Electric Illuminating Company to generate electricity for the street railway system and for a limited number of other electric customers in downtown Topeka. Steam was a by-product of generation and was piped to nearby businesses as a heat source.

Steam heat was distributed to an area generally bounded by 5th and 10th Streets, and Quincy and Harrison Streets. "There is a system of

Steam plant

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pipes to carry the steam under the streets and alleys of downtown Topeka," Toland said. Customers included most downtown businesses, some residences formerly in the area, and the State Capitol and later the State Office Building. Residences receiving steam heat were last served in 1974.

In the early 1920s most of the electricity from the Van Buren plant was used for power, such as running the city's streetcars. If it was a dark day and more electricity was needed for lighting, a streetcar circuit had to be shut down to provide extra power during the heavy load.

On Saturday nights, when all of the downtown stores were open for business, the peak load reached the point where it exceeded the capacity of the plant. When the load reached the critical point, employees would be sent from store to store requesting that the store owner turn off all window lighting. Unless the businessman cooperated by reducing load, all of the lights in the business section would go out for an hour or two.

By 1924, the capacity of the Van Buren plant was substantially less than customer demand. The Kansas Power and Light Co. was incorporated to buy the Edison Company, and its first project was to build a bigger and more efficient coal-fired generating plant at Tecumseh. The Tecumseh Energy Center, first operated in 1926, is one of the KPL generating plants still in use today.

The Van Buren plant continued to generate some electricity until 1934, and since then has been used only to produce steam.