

Nanaimo Historical Society Fonds :Series 2 Sound Recordings  
Tape 12

"Gas Works 1886" by William Barraclough November 8th, 1966

Transcribed by Glenys Wall, June 2004

Barraclough:

It was my intention, after presenting the article on the early gas industry in Nanaimo, to continue with the subject of light with a paper concerning the first electrical generation in Nanaimo to produce light also. These two systems of producing light became so interwoven between the years 1880, 1890 and 1891, first with the rivalry to produce the most satisfactory street lighting in Nanaimo and later as they became merged under one management. I presented a paper on the history of the development of electricity in Nanaimo before the Historical Society in St. Paul's Hall on January 20th 1954 and in going over the script, to bring it up to date with the added information acquired in the past twelve years, the article became too long to be dealt with at this time along with the article on the gas. I much prefer to present it, Mr. President, at some future date, provided I get invited to do so.

Now my subject concerns one of man's prime requisites of living, namely, light. One of the first acts of creation, in the Book of Genesis says, "Let there be light !" but it would be a futile attempt to compare artificial light to that of sunlight, but man-made light has been and is one of the chief necessities for his existence. Through the ages man has devised various methods to make light such as rush lamps, candles, oil flares, etc. and putting all these methods away, I come to the history of making or the processing of modern light in Nanaimo.

One of Nanaimo's earliest industries concerned the making of coal gas for lighting our streets. Material for my talk was obtained from a variety of sources, including the files of the Nanaimo Free Press, much of it taken from the City of Nanaimo Council meeting records and from personal interviews with people who had some knowledge of the time when the gas plant was in operation.

Now the founding committee for promoting the industry, eh I cannot find... er there was no record of any committee..shall we call them the founding committee, but the founding committee must have requested Mayor Mark Bate to go to Victoria to enter into an agreement with the British Columbia Construction Company to build and establish a gas works at Nanaimo. Researching through the files of the Free Press, I uncovered this item concerning that establishment of the gas works. It's dated Saturday, February 2nd 1886:

" A telegram received from Victoria last evening from Mayor Bate states the B.C. Construction Company have executed the agreement to establish gas works in this city and supply the citizens with gas. No doubt the Company will commence operations, as by the agreement the Works are to be completed and gas furnished by October 31st 1886. Start on the erection of the gas works building was September 14th 1886."

Now like all projects, or most projects, the construction company encountered some difficulties to meet the date of October 31st. for at another city council meeting of Wednesday January 5th 1887, a communication was read from Mr. Milne, Secretary of the British Columbia Construction Company stating that "owing to unavoidable delay in procuring the

pipes and retorts, the Company would not be able to complete the gas works by December 31st" and asked for an extension of time for one month. Also that the Company had decided to put in new iron street lamps in place of the poles at present in use. Now what we give to have one of those iron gas standards today! Where are they? Wouldn't that be a souvenir today? The communication was received thanking the construction company for their liberality in placing the new iron street lamps.

At the same council meeting of January 5th 1887 an amendment to extend the time for completing the gas works to February 28th were dealt with and on motion of Councillor J. Hilbert the amendment passed its first, second and third reading. Boy they hurried things along didn't they? Three reading in one night! May I digress just briefly from the subject of light because reading the minutes of the council meeting of January 5th 1887 I came across two little items that I think they are worth repeating. Amongst the accounts passed for payment were two interesting items, one for A.G. Horne and Sons for \$5.00 and one for Jesse Sage for \$43.00. Now Jesse Sage, he was a Princess Royal passenger; he died here in Nanaimo in 1910. But Jesse Sage figured in so many council meetings through the next two or three years that I have followed, as a ...he must have been a small contractor for he put the flume under Albert Street, I don't know where the flume is today, and he worked away on the cliff. He lived for some years where the high-rise is today, that was in the house er... the clubhouse that the Hudson's Bay Company built to entertain their officials when they came to Nanaimo. There was a clubhouse right where the high-rise is now and Jesse Sage lived there for some years. Now to Mr. A.G. Horne; he arrived on this coast in the ship Tory in 1901. Oh no,.. he died in 1901. Mr. A.G. Horne, who was storekeeper at Nanaimo for the Hudson's Bay Company in 1851 and later, building his own place of business, in 1863 and the building was situated near the present Federal Building. As a matter of fact it was just at the top of the old CPR ramp and that was his store. It was used afterwards as a court house and later as a jail, and there are pictures of the site extant today showing the white picket-fence all around it. But that was...the building itself was Mr. A. G. Horne's first store.

I cannot find any record of the progress made in constructing the gas plant. There just isn't anything, anywhere! I have almost made this paper out of thin air but I am giving you the best I can! The Free Press files for Wednesday, January 19th 1887 reporting for the big day of January 15th had headlines in the Free Press, three big headlines. It said "Turn on the gas!", "May its light never go dim!", "City lighted with gas!". That took up right at the top of the paper. Now Mr. Bate [unintelligible]. On Saturday 15th January 1887 at 1 p.m. Mayor Bate, Mr. R. Gibson, Mayor-Elect, and Councillors W.E. Webb, J. Hilbert, A.G. Horne, G. Bevilockway, C. Wilson. and Messrs. R. Craig and R. Aitkin, Councillors-elect, assembled at the Nanaimo Gas Works, Bridge Street, for the purpose of assisting in the turning on the gas to the City of Nanaimo. Now these gentlemen must have been an amiable lot when you think that we had the Mayor, the Mayor-Elect, and the Councillors and the Councillors-Elect all in one ceremony! It just wouldn't make sense today would it? [laughter]. However, the party was received at the works by Mr. J.L. Standford, the engineer who had erected the plant and the gasometer was filled to capacity with 12,500 cubic feet of gas and coal was used from Number 1 Mine. Would that be a lot of gas Mr. [?]? [unintelligible response].

Now here's an interesting item. The ceremony of turning on the gas was done by His Worship Mayor Bate and Mr. R. Gibson, the Mayor-Elect. Now did they both take a hand at the wheel to turn on the gas or did one turn it off and turn it on and then the other? Wouldn't it be interesting to know just how they both felt to turn on the gas. It was announced that the City of

Nanaimo had ample resources at their command and Saturday evening the gas was lighted in all the business houses in the City and to Mr. A.G. Horne & Son belong the honour of getting the first light. Well that would be reasonable; he was an alderman and [laughing] built his store there, so that's what it said. Now the change from coal oil lamps was a marked improvement and it was expected the street lamps would soon be lighted. I was informed by Mr. W. Lewis the lamps were of a lantern square type; I have a picture here that you can see later. There is one of the original iron gas lamps with the arms on; it's the only picture that I have been able to find. It was an open gas flame, he said. A Mr. Tom Miller, who acted as night watchman for the business houses, went around about dusk with a ladder to light the lamps and Mr. Lewis said he leaned his ladder against these cross arms here, he remembers that. Mr. Lewis had worked sometime.. Mr. Abrams at the store at the corner of Commercial and Skinner Streets where Mr. Abrams had a general store and there he assisted in servicing fourteen coal oil lamps every day to light the store. The iron light standards, he said, came from Victoria and Mr. George Norris and Mr. W. K. Leighton and Mr. Hilbert were shareholders. At present I haven't been able to find any other names, but they will turn up. At a City Council meeting, Wednesday February 9th 1887, tenders were received for getting the city hall equipped to use gaslights. From Mr. O'Donahue, \$95.00 and from Mr. J. H. Place, \$78.50. The Place tender was accepted, and Mr. Place he conducted a hardware shop right down the Crescent, that's right. And he was a great advertiser in the paper.

At a City Council meeting of February 9th 1887 er.... Wednesday, Wednesday June 8th 1887 accounts passed for payment by Council, the gas company, this might interest you [unintelligible] gas company for lighting the Council chambers \$1.30 [laughter]; the city-hall \$4.45 and the street lamps that were installed, \$75.00 for the month. The open gas flame lights at this time were being replaced with mantle type burners and speaking to a few citizens who were here and saw the change over from the open gas light to the mantle, they thought it was a wonderful improvement. Then we have another account here I found a little later, on September of the same year, street lighting..it was later in the year yet the street lighting is in half, \$38.40! I think I'll catch up on why that was in a moment. The upstairs hall, would that be the council hall upstairs in the old....opposite the theatre there? [agreement from someone in the audience] That was \$1.30 and the main hall where all the work was done, \$7.95 and the fire-engine house was \$5.25. That would be where Walls & Bradshaw is today.

On June 2nd 1888 the gas company declared a 7% dividend on the stock. That was pretty good in one year's operation. Er,.... in letters to the Council, February 27th 1888 they had suggested street lamps be placed at the corner of Wentworth and Selby, the corner of Halliburton and Farquhar, corner of Fry and Farquhar, Lubbock Square, where we already have a gas light at present. Prideaux at the [cutting?] of Fitzwilliam. Anyone can remember Fitzwilliam being cut down there? It was cut down, it says at the cutting. I wasn't here then [discussion in the audience]. There was a note that said that other locations that the Council would suggest would be considered. So er...that's as far as I could get on that one.

Complaints of poor street lighting were reported at Council meetings over long periods and lasted for about two years. Also poor pressure for domestic use was reported. The distribution system began to deteriorate after time when at a city council meeting on November 24th 1891 several reports, complaints of defective gas lighting were considered. And why all the streetlights were not regularly lighted. The Council notified the gas company that streetlights would not be required after December 31st. Now all the trouble of the street lights being out could not be blamed on the gas company for I have heard from people who know that just as

soon as the lamplighter was out of sight, young boys would shinny up the gas standards and turn out the lights, so the gas company was not to blame for those. However, electric lights were first used on the streets of Nanaimo on 23rd November 1891. Four years after the gas works was established in 1886 a new competition for light and power was organized here in 1890 called the Nanaimo Electric Light, Power and Heating Company and the inroads electric light had made to replace gas lighting would have influenced the City Council to cancel the gas lighting on city streets. And so here are a few assorted items that just follow on as much as the information I have been able to get about the gas company.

Mr. Albert Edward Mainwaring bought out the declining gas works and his son William, or Billy Mainwaring as he was known and is still known to Nanaimo people, assisted in the operation. He was a young chap working around the plant at the time his father bought out the gas works. The business proved to be a poor investment owing to the run down condition of the service lines. Then Billy Mainwaring, as you know, joined the Northern Electric Company of Vancouver, afterwards becoming very prominent in the B.C. Electric Company and other promotional developments in British Columbia. An electric company headed by Mr. Joseph Hunter, civil engineer of Victoria, which had previously acquired the original electric system, bought out the gas works in 1891. That's what I was trying to say in the first place. The two systems are really one continuous story, and they wrap and they cross one another, that is so difficult to sort them out and make them one item. However, I would be glad to give you the electric some other time. Mr. William Lewis, who was manager of the electric company, was made manager of manager of the gas works also. The electric company operated the gas system for two years and then owing to leaky service lines, twice as much gas as being manufactured was sold to customers, resulting in the gas works being closed down. I might say that old gas lines are still being dug up in the city streets. I saw one just quite recently being dug up on Skinner Street in the old Gough House, Hiram!! I saw a gas line being dug up into the old Gough house on Skinner Street, not too long ago, right! And I'm glad to tell our gasman here that they have the new gas in that same house today.

Mr. Piper salvaged some ornamental gas fixtures for the new museum, that's some of the props we have here to try and get some of the atmosphere for the period when gas was in use. When the south approach to the Pearson Bridge was being built in 1954 I saw a large bulldozer unearth the old gasometer. It had been buried under several feet of fill through the years and he was quite surprised when this huge, round base of the gasometer came up. So we know exactly where it was. It was just right in the middle of the road on the approach to the bridge.

Interviewing Miss Mary Freeman in her home on Pine Street on Monday October 17th this year, concerning her association with the gas company and the electric light company I was informed that a Mr. Thomas was the manager of the gas works before it was sold to Mr. Mainwaring. Mr. Thomas was working on an idea to patent that was considered a great improvement in the use of gas other than for lighting. Billy Mainwaring was employed as a handyman around the gas works doing a variety of jobs, and he, knowing the project Mr. Thomas was working on, it is thought that he influenced his father to buy out the gas works, which, anyone that knows Mainwaring I think there is a lot in that. Miss Freeman being bookkeeper for Heman's & Mainwaring's, which was sold to Pat Burns & Company, May 20th 1912, went as Mr. Mainwaring's office assistant at the gas works and when the Nanaimo Electric Company bought out the gas works, Mr. Lewis asked Miss Freeman to work for them at their office, attending to both sets of books, until the gas accounts were cleared away. Now

I asked Miss Freeman where the office was, was it at the plant? She there was a little office at the plant belonging to the first gas company but when Mr. Mainwaring bought it out he rented a little space at the Davenport on Commercial Street. He had a little office in there. I haven't passed anything up at all, I assure you, that I could get my hands on.

Now here is an item I found very amusing made possible with gaslight. On Saturday May 10th 1888, a prizefight was staged under the gaslights in front of the park area on Wallace Street. Now I hope someone tells me where that is! Constable Tom O'Connell came on the scene during the second round. There was a good crowd of men but he stopped the fight. That was from the gaslight. There is still a house on Nob Hill called the Tom O'Connell house. Now the gas works was used for the relief of young people suffering from whooping cough. The children sat there for long periods and speaking to a medic a few days ago he stated the humid, warm vapour from the coal tar could have been beneficial but he had never heard of it. Well most of our doctors are young people and none of them ever seen gas works I don't suppose [laughing] acquainted with it.

Now people as I said it takes about twenty minutes to deliver this paper, which I think is about right. There is so little ...this is one of the few pictures I have been able to get with the gas light and this is the year when they cancelled the light, I assume, and went to electricity for there is an arc light on there too. I'll pass it around for you to see. There's the two lights..... [sounds of discussion].

Ladies and gentlemen that completes my paper.

Voice of unknown man: I'm sure, Mr. Barraclough, that everyone here thoroughly enjoyed this remarkable paper on a forgotten era. When I mention that the gas works, of course, was part of our history, and although we do now find odd evidence when they are digging, they dig up the odd main or gas pipe, apart from that there is very little to show and very little history left. The research that you have done on this is remarkable with so little to go on. So thank you once again Mr. Barraclough for a very fine paper.

Mr. Barraclough: Thank you very much, Mr. Burdoch [?] the pleasure, I assure you, has been mine. I've enjoyed every minute of the research and I am so pleased that the paper has been accepted and received by the gathering here this evening.

END OF TAPE