

**NANAIMO HISTORICAL SOCIETY FONDS  
Series 2 Sound Recordings**

**Tape 29a, Side 2**

**William Barraclough talking about electricity in Nanaimo, [February 14th 1967]**

Transcribed by Glenys Wall  
June 2004

Recording begins with no introduction and sound quality is poor.

**Barraclough:**

... a further increase was obtained by the installation of a 500 KVA [unintelligible] turbine and water wheel direct connected to a CGE generator of the same capacity. This required the installation of a larger pipeline from Number 1 dam on Millstone River to Number 1 Plant. New wood pipe replaced [unintelligible] 30 inches at the dam and 32 inches at the plant, which in turn had replaced the open wooded flue from the tanks and 32-inch pipe in 1927.

Mr. Frank Cartwright supplied this account:

" I came to Nanaimo as a young boy in 1894, served four years as an apprentice at Dobson's Nanaimo Foundry as a machinist; worked as machinist at the Powder Works from 1911 to 1918 and then took up the study of steam engineering and generating electricity. Commenced working for Nanaimo Duncan Utilities in 1926 as chief engineer at the Millstone Power Plant to replace Mr. Andrew Markdor? who had promoted to supervise the distribution system. We worked three shifts of eight hours with an engineer and fireman each shift. In 1926 the electrical output was made of at Number 1 Plant, 300 KW by steam vertical engine; 500 KW by steam turbine; 400 KW by pump and water wheel and 200 KW by pump and water wheel at Number 2 Jinglepot Plant, a total of 1400 KW. In 1947 when I left the plant for duties as supervisor of power line systems, the output was 6000 KW. When I retired in 1958, the peak load was about 250,000 KWs. The power plant was very efficient to supply the power demand, except when low water was in effect on Millstone River, then we had problems. I remember dry, fall season when there was not enough water to run the water wheels until 3 days before Christmas."

The following was related to me by Mr. William Lewis at his home, 60 Dawes Street, November 28th 1953:

" I arrived at Nanaimo, October 12th 1875 about midnight. It was very dark, there were no lights about. After working for some years at various occupations, I had the good fortune to know a Mr. James Allan Ward Bell who was accountant for the electric company. Mr. Bell introduced me to Mr. Joseph Hunter, manager of the electric works, when I was engaged as collector, April 1897 at \$70.00 per month. The office at this time was situated at the Ravine Plant. Mr. Bell instructed me how to post up the accounts in the big detail register. Mr. Bell was appointed manager later. Mr.

Hunter resided most of the time in Victoria. Mechanics' pay at the plant was \$65.00 per month, fireman \$60.00, the arc-light men, who attended the streetlights had \$80.00 per month and he was the highest paid man. Slack coal for the boilers cost 80 cents per long ton of 2240 pounds at the mine or a \$1.35 per ton delivered. There were only 40 retail metres on the system; the rate was 20 cents per kilowatt-hour. For residences without metres, only 16 candlepower lamps were allowed at the rate of \$1.00 for one light, \$2.00 for two lights, \$2.50 for three lights and \$3.00 per month for four lights. It was considered a real good show to have 4 lights burning. And remember these were only 16 power candlelight's! The hospital paid a flat rate of \$14.00 per month when they could pay the account. Mr. Hunter was most considerate of the hospital and I have only the kindest remembrances of his conducting of the affairs of the electrical company. To be collector was not an easy task. I would set out to call on the customers for payment and very often they did not have the money, not even a silver dollar. Money used in those days in Nanaimo was mostly gold and silver coins; paper money was just beginning to be in general use. When I met the boat to receive money from the purser or to ship money to Victoria it was nearly all gold and silver. Previous to 1900, clear cedar poles cost 3 cents per linear foot with a nine-inch top. Around 1900, the cost rose to 15 cents per linear foot for number 1 poles. During this period it cost about \$10.00 to buy and set in the ground a forty-foot pole. I became manager of the company in 1903 and secretary-manager in 1910, having one share in the company, retiring in 1931. The office was moved from Ravine Plant to the Johnston Block, 215 Commercial Street in 1905, rent was \$20.00 per month. It moved again to Wallace Street in 1913 and again to the Windsor Building in 1918."

*(not clear from the tape whether this is the end of the quote)*

The original plant had a capacity of 100 horsepower, to serve 218 customers. In 1898, street lighting was the arc type current. Distribution lines extended to the approximate site of the present Shell Oil Company warehouse, then it was the Provincial Jail site on Stewart Avenue and Townsite Road on the north south to the Columbus Hotel, west of the site of the present hospital, that's on Kennedy Street and around the business section of Nanaimo. 1895, February 1st, agreement between Nanaimo Electric Works and Nanaimo Hospital signed by Mr. Donald Smith, honourable secretary of Nanaimo Hospital, with seal attached and J.A.W. Bell, manager, on behalf of the Nanaimo Electric Light Works, agreement states for incandescent lights as now installed for \$14.00 per month, expiring January 31st 1896. A letter from Victoria dated August 17th 1904 addressed to Mr. Samuel Gough, City Clerk, I only quote it in part here:

" I have your letter of the 13th instance. Your Council feel inclined to go into the matter of acquiring the Light Works subject to the approval of the ratepayers. The contract with the city did not expire until August 1st 1905 when negotiations could then be considered. Signed, Joseph Hunter"

Here follow several selected items from the diaries of Mr. William Lewis and newspaper clippings that are of interest:

"1904

Street lighting committee recommended that two 16 candlepower lights be installed near the E & N Station of Fitzwilliam Street.

"February 11th, violent storm toppled power and telephone poles, wires all crossed up. City in darkness. Reports of telephones bursting into flames up the walls. Several accounts of citizens complaining about rates charged for electricity and water shortages".

"Thursday, November 3rd 1904, this is the first day for a time that there is enough water to run the hydro machines"

And quoting from the *Nanaimo Free Press*, for April 27th 1905, large headlines announced:

"Turn on the water, power plant at the new electric station almost ready" this quoted in part of a long article:

" Tomorrow for the first time water will be turned on at the new power station of the Nanaimo Electric Light, Power and Heating on the banks of the Millstone River. That does not mean that the works are ready for operations yet, because although the water power plant is in position none of the electrical light machinery has been moved from the present station. The turning on of the water is to see that everything in connection with that portion of the improvements is in perfect condition; although there doesn't seem to be any doubt on that end as everything has been built in a most substantial manner, the water-works is to replace the steam now used by the company. The water wheels are set on solid, concrete foundations. The two flywheels, eight feet in diameter, and with 22-inch facings, were furnished by the Albion Iron Works, Vancouver, but all other castings were produced from Nanaimo Foundry which has done excellent work in this respect. Another improvement is to do away with the direct current and employ the alternating machines. The steam plant will be moved to the new power-house and kept for emergencies."

A few more items culled from some of the early diaries:

"1905, May 8th, moved the large arc machine to the new power house.  
May 10th arc machine running good, turned by the water-wheel".

"Monday, July 17th, three and a half inches of water going over the dam, eleven inches of water in pool; twelve hundred lights and large arc lights being served".

" Tuesday August 9th, 1905", an item states, " 6 horses pulled a 14 by 66 foot boiler from the Ravine Plant to the new power-house in three hours".

" Monday August 22nd, at 2.40 p.m. steam let into engine which turned over for first time; 36 days taking down and resetting of engine".

" January 31st, 1907," here is an account of a copy with the City of Nanaimo for street lighting, " 51 street lights for 31 nights at 31 cents, \$490.00; 5 incandescent lights of 16 candle power at a \$1.00, \$5.00; one incandescent light at 32 candle power at a \$1.50, \$1.50; total \$494.61 cents, less rebate of lights out, \$13.76, balance \$483.85".

"1908, Sunday May 31st, at 7.30 p.m. Mr. Lewis went to China Town for inspection. Lead wires

were down on one house on account of a chinaman tearing down a building, live wires on the street. Saturday night they were arrested."

In 1917, the first 3 phase motor, 5 horse-power, was constructed by Ben Griffiths, who is still employed as a line foreman with the B.C. Power Commission to run the press for the *Nanaimo Daily Herald*:

" Our machinery at *Nanaimo Free Press* was gas operated until 1918, when a conversion to electricity was made. Transportation for linemen, meter readers etc. was by bicycle or on foot with teamsters being hired to haul the poles and line materials. The first truck, a 1-ton Model T was purchased in 1927. Former employees of Nanaimo Electric Light and Power Company, retired but still living in Nanaimo include: William Lewis, Joe Piper, Mary Freeman, Louie Lawrence and Dick Alexander."

An item dated May 15th 1919: " While Mr. William Lewis and Mr. Ned Armstrong were inspecting Number 1 Dam on Millstone River owing to high water, they were washed over the falls. They managed to get ashore lower down the river but both suffered bruises".

Most of the items in the early diaries of the Hydro Plant are chiefly concerned with weather reports and water flow on Millstone River. In 1954, Mr. Charles Nash of the B.C. Power Corporation, Nanaimo Office, presented Nanaimo Historical Society with a comprehensive account of the changes in management of electrical system and the tremendous progress made to develop more power for this part of Vancouver Island from 1926 to 1945. The four-page report is included in this history. Briefly stated, changes in management operation taken from the report:

In 1926, the International Utilities purchased the holdings of the Nanaimo Electric Light, Heat and Power Company and immediately following this a sale was negotiated to this utility by the municipal system in Duncan. In 1934, the Canadian Utilities disposed of their interest to a company called Nanaimo Duncan Utilities. In 1940, a new hydro unit was installed in Nanaimo; in 1945, the British Columbia Commission took over. Mr. Nash also presented the Historical Society with a large register of customer accounts of the electric company covering the period September 1898 to October 1904. Records previous to 1898 are not available at present. In showing the register to Mr. William Lewis, he recognized his handwriting on posting the accounts for those days and parts of the register. Some very interesting items concerning pioneer names and business houses and the amount of electric currencies and other particulars are shown in this register.

As shown:

The Bank of Halifax is listed on the first page for September 1898 for incandescent current, \$6.70, for [unintelligible] \$6.50, the meter rent 25 cents, total \$13.45.

The account stops in December 1900. The following month, January 1901, the Royal Bank Account is posted. The Bank of Halifax may have been a customer for electrical current previous to 1898.

The Bank of British Columbia first commenced in a log cottage on Front Street previous to 1888. On September 12 1888, the Bank let a contract to build a two storey, brick, bank-building at Number 55 Front Street close by the log building. On November 7th the building was completed; the Bank moved in the new premises December 15th 1888. On January 4th 1891, the Bank opened a savings department; there is an account in the register for December 1898 for electric current \$10.00 and lamps \$1.00. The Bank of British Columbia account for electricity ends in December 1900.

The Bank of Commerce first account for electric current was posted for January 1901.

In December 1898, the YMCA and the Nanaimo Opera House were both listed as electrical users.

There are 21 hotels listed as having electric current, 14 in the year 1899 and the rest in the following years. I will name them here: Nanaimo, Newcastle, Britannia, Grand, Wilson, Central, Commercial, Oriental, Balmoral, Provincial, Windsor, Crescent, Palace, Globe, Old Flag, Temperance, Identical, Vendome, Queens, Eagles, and the Dewdrop.

There were 30 listings for Chinese houses and businesses. Here are added notes of historic interest:

Mr. Joseph Hunter, who bought the electric plant, in October 1892 was a civil engineer. In 1877, Mr. Hunter reported discovering the Pine River Pass. He made the railway survey from Howe Sound to Lilloet. He acted for the Dominion Government in marking the boundary between Canada and Alaska on the Stikine River. He laid out the E & N Railway and was its first superintendent. Mr. Hunter died in Victoria in 1935 aged 93.

An item concerning Mr. James Allan Ward Bell mentioned earlier as secretary, who introduced Mr. Lewis to Mr. Joseph Hunter, was the first European baby born on the north shore of Burrard Inlet, September 13th 1873. This item is taken from the Sunday Sun magazine for November 27th 1954. His brother, John, was witness to the hospital agreement for electric current contract, February 1st 1895. Mr. James Allan Ward Bell wrote considerable poetry.

As part of this article are two sets of light and power rates of earlier times, unfortunately no dates are given. Also the original agreement with the hospital on light years dated February 1st 1895 and pictures of different views connected with the electric industry.

Quoting from a letter dated June 3rd 1926 to Mr. William Lewis from Mr. Joseph Hunter, quoting in part:

" I ever found, a trusted and devoted friend and business associate, of sterling honour and integrity."

This is William Barraclough speaking.

**End of Tape**