

Retiring PUC worker remembers having to turn street lights on

Intell May 27/78

By HENRY BURY
Staff Reporter

When it comes to power—the electrical kind—Tom Helm has seen it all. And why not, the Belleville resident has just completed his 48th year of service with the Belleville Public Utilities Commission, retiring at the end of this month.

During those years, Helm has witnessed power blackouts ordered by Ontario Hydro, has had rocks thrown at him and been physically thrown out of homes while trying to disconnect the electricity from delinquent customers. And for a number of years, was the sole person responsible for turning on the city's street lights at dusk.

And through it all, Helm has lived at 12 Reid St., on the shore of the Moira River. The house, owned by the utility, is only 100 feet away from the substation, which for a while, was the city's only substation.

It was also the place of work for Helm. He was substation operator there from 1938 to 1966, most of the time, being the only person there.

(A substation cuts down the voltage of power coming in from Ontario Hydro from 44,000 volts to 4,160 volts, which in turn is further cut down by street transformers. There are nine substations now in the city.)

As its operator, Helm said, he was usually the first one to

hear of any break in the electrical system.

"It was part of my job to live in the house, as I was on 24-hour duty. If anything happened in the substation, it would ring an alarm at the house. If there was a break, I'd have to call the line department. I then isolated the system so that linemen could work on it and repair the break," he said.

"This substation controlled the whole city, and if anything happened to the substation, the entire city could have been blacked out. I remember once I was stuck in the substation for three straight days, with linemen calling in to isolate the breaks in the system so they could repair them. I just had to be

there. But those things didn't happen very often," Helm added.

Helm started working at the utility commission in 1930, at 30 cents an hour. He started with the line department, first digging post holes and then climbing hydro poles. He then went to the meter and service department, and after that to the substation. In 1966, the utility moved its office to College St., so he also assumed duties of building maintenance; in 1975 he left the substation department to take over the supervision of building and property of the commission.

Helm said that when he retires, he will be moving to St. Ola, 25 miles north of Madoc, and calling it home.

During the Depression while he was with the service department, Helm recalled that once he had to go to a Pinnacle St. home to disconnect the power after the customer had failed to pay his bill.

"While I was up on a chair, breaking the seal on an entrance box, taking the fuses out and then resealing it, the man of the house picked me up bodily and threw me out the door. Another time, I had to disconnect the power from a home at the corner of Herchimer Ave. and Dundas St.. I had to disconnect it from the hydro pole, and while I was doing up there it, the tenants were throwing stones at me."

"These weren't humorous at the time," Helm said.

As substation operator from 1938 to the mid-1940's Helm was responsible for operating the street lights, by manually turning a switch at dusk.

"I had to be around or make arrangements for a lineman to turn on the lights. Sometimes you had to drop anything you were doing or come back from wherever you were to turn the street lights on. That was the biggest headache of the operation in those days," he said.

But he added, "They had a time clock to turn the street lights off in the morning, so we wouldn't have to get up too early."

An electric eye now automatically switches on the lights.



Years in power

Tom Helm stands beside the substation where he worked in for 28 years as operator. Just behind the substation, is his home, owned by the Belleville Public Utilities Commission. Helm retires from the commission at the end of this month, having spent 48 years working there.