

First faint electric light amazed Acton residents at turn of century

The first electric lamp flickered on in Acton well before the turn of the century, when a travelling "Professor" Kent drew a big audience of admiring Actonians for a demonstration of what the future had in store. The deft professor had a little portable generator, and he staged his display in the old Temperance Hall on Church St.

It wasn't so many years afterward that bare electric light bulbs dangling from new wire, replaced oil lamps in a few lucky homes and shops in the up-and-coming village.

An efficient steam power generator was installed in the building where the Free Press is now and for many years, the town had its own engineer. By 1908 there were between 30 and 40 users of electricity, and there was some street corner lighting they should be metered, they were beginning to use so much power.

In the beginning, the generator was simply shut down at night, and there was no power after 10 p.m., an hour when all respectable citizens should be home.

By 1912, Acton's own power plant was "in an overloaded condition and entirely inadequate to the needs of the growing village."

How about Hydro - Electric power from Niagara Falls for Acton?

This solution was first introduced in January 1912, when at council "The by-law to provide \$8,500 for the purpose of completing and equipping the (old) power plant to distribute electric power in the village of Acton and to authorize debentures for that amount" was introduced.

Doughty councillors of '12 were Reeve Hynds, John Kennedy, C. C. Speight, Dr. E. D. Ault, A. E. Nicklin, John Kenney and William Johnstone.

"There being a considerable gathering of leading citizens present," the Free Press reports, "Reeve Hynds gave a very lucid and interesting resume of the benefits to be derived by the municipality from the installation of the Hydro-Electric power."

Discussed were costs and revenue.

At a well-attended public meeting, Reeve Hynds declared "We call it a municipal plant and find ourselves obliged to refuse electric lighting privileges to scores of our citizens who have a right to demand installation!"

To secure an adequate supply of current, independent of Hydro - Electric connection, would cost just as much as the Hydro - Electric system and we would still have to shovel coal and pay for the wear and tear of expensive machinery."

With the Hydro-Electric tie-in, Acton would have improved street lighting, he promised — and maybe the lights could even stay on all night!

Those present 66 street lights of 32 candlepower could be upped to 120 lights with the power of 100 (count them, 100) candles each. And if Acton's future really hummed, they could double the number!

Reeve Hynds had the citizens' full attention in the town hall, as he went on to predict grandly "we can do away with the present inadequate swinging lights and have the MODERN lights from neat brackets or clusters of brackets and utilize the new tungsten

lamps and neat shades similar to those used in the Larger Towns and Cities." (Think of it, people!)

In town then, there were 1,400 lights gleaming (only when necessary, of course), with only adequate power for 750.

With the new service, there would be power for 3,000 lights — and the power could be left on 24 hours a day!

The ladies held onto their bonnets and the gentlemen beamed as the reeve continued with his great vision — motors, washing machines, sewing machines, electric irons — and breakfast toast electrically produced!

The new system would more than double the 1911 total revenue of \$3,750 for power and rates could gradually be reduced, he promised. (Whatever happened to that one?)

Members of council did all this work free of charge — "for love of the town," he told one cautious questioner.

Eager Rockwood residents present said they hoped for a connection from Acton; they wanted street lights. Even farmers were beginning to visualize the possible benefits of electric power.

"The vote was almost unanimous," triumphed the paper. "Never before in the history of Acton's municipal career was any by-law entailing the expenditure of money carried with such a degree of unanimity."

One hundred and fifty-seven progressive Actonians voted "yeas", but there were eight old-fashioned heel - draggers who cast "nays".

The famed Sir Adam Beck himself promptly wrote the town fathers the construction

of the hydro line to Acton would begin "without delay". He added negotiations were derway with Milton, Georgetown and Rockwood, too.

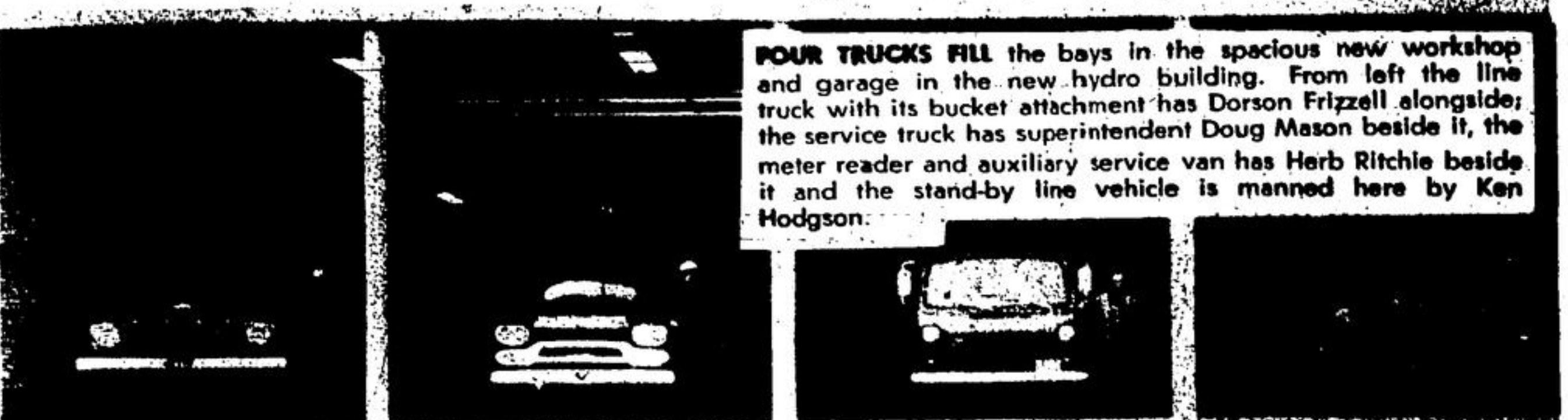
The Free Press of March 7, 1912, exulted, "Watch Acton grow! Hydro - Electric power, new electric railway, manufacturing enlarging, new businesses coming, customs office. The coming season will be a busy one!"

On April 30, 1912, the contract was signed for the supply of up to 200 H.P. from the Ontario Hydro. The system went into operation in 1913 with a demand of 141 H.P. In the first full year of operation, there were 272 customers.

Six months after the waterworks were installed in Acton, it was decided to change the Hydro-Electric Commission to a Public Utilities Commission to handle both power and water. A front page headline in the Free Press made the editor's opinion pretty clear, "The Public Utilities by-law should receive approval of the ratepayers of Acton for economy's sake."

The reeve and councillors also placed an ad on the front page (yes, the FRONT page), saying "Vote for the Public Utilities by-law for more economic and efficient administration." Advantages promised were one superintendent instead of two; one office and staff for all the work; all accounts payable there; electric and water meters read at one visit and a satisfactory Commission system, proven in other municipalities.

So, in December, 1926, Acton Hydro - Electric Commission was replaced by a Public Utilities Commission, when the by-law was put to the pub-



POUR TRUCKS FILL the bays in the spacious new workshop and garage in the new hydro building. From left the line truck with its bucket attachment has Dorson Fritzell alongside; the service truck has superintendent Doug Mason beside it, the meter reader and auxiliary service van has Herb Ritchie beside it and the stand-by line vehicle is manned here by Ken Hodgson.

lic and passed. Its passing had been especially urged by Councillor Theford, who had charge of the Waterworks Department.

"The waterworks is now being put on a paying basis," the Free Press of December 1926 reports, "and especially if the Public Utilities by-law is adopted."

Next week came the election with a turnout of only 340 electors; however, the Public Utilities by-law passed. (Councillors elected that same day were L. E. Atkinson, John Nicol, E. T. Theford and Frank Holmes. Reeve was Amos Mason.)

The first P.U.C. comprised L. G. King as chairman with members E. J. Hassard and Reeve Amos Mason. Charles W. Wilson was superintendent and Miss Bertie Speight was secretary - treasurer. Of these, only Mr. King is still alive; he lives in Sudbury.

Meetings were held in the Hydro shop then, but when

the Y building was opened in 1935, the P.U.C. office was established where the town office is now.

During the many years that Mr. Wilson was superintendent, high standards were maintained, and many improvements made, such as the automatic turning-on of the street lights to coincide with the coming of darkness, which Mr. Wilson devised himself. He utilized the electric eye principle, which was then in its infancy.

Waterworks accounts were handed over by town council to the new group.

With the increase in work, the P.U.C. soon decided to "discontinue the handling of general electrical stock at the shop on Mill St. and to confine the stock carried to small accessories daily needed, such as bulbs, plugs and electrical irons."

In 1941, the town treasurer's and tax collector's office was added.

Hydro and waterworks duties were divided in 1947, with Mr. Wilson in charge of the hydro and Jack Lambert in charge of the waterworks.

More came into the office the next year when a clerk's office was included.

In '52 the town's sewage system was turned over to the waterworks department, and the Main St. well was turned in to the system that same year.

Acton P.U.C. was dissolved in 1952, by plebiscite — 365 in favor of dissolution and 201 against.

The newly formed Hydro Electric Commission held its inaugural meeting in January, 1960, with chairman Ted Tyler Sr., vice-chairman Gord Beaty, commissioners Dr. F. G. Oakes, G. F. McCutcheon and Mayor W. H. Cook.

By this time, there were 1,297 customers of all classes and the domestic load had grown to 455 kilowatt hours per month.

The Alice St. property where the new building is located was bought from the town in 1960. The two substations were bought from Ontario Hydro in 1959 and 1960. No. 1 substation was converted from 25 to 60 cycle in 1963.

Hopes for a new hydro building, built around the Alice St. workshop, waxed and waned with cost estimates — a constant source of meeting discussion in the former rented office on Elgin St.

At the present time, the commission serves 1,247 domestic, 71 commercial and 40 industrial customers with a staff of six. The system now includes two transformer stations and 19 miles of line within the town limits.

The monthly power use has risen to 625 kilowatt hours per month at an average cost of 1.1 cents per kilowatt hour. And thus the history of light in Acton is brought up - to - date.



CHAIRMAN TED TYLER presides at the meetings of the Acton Hydro Commission in the spacious, panelled board room of the new building. From left commission members are Doug Dawkins, secretary Audrey Urquhart, superintendent Doug Mason, standing; chairman Tyler, Orville Brown and Wilf McEachern. (Staff Photo)

Ontario Hydro like "benevolent watchdog"

Just how do hydro, council and Ontario Hydro fit together on the family tree of administration?

Ontario Hydro serves the Acton Commission two ways. One is in the role of a benevolent watchdog over capital expenditures and rate charges, and the other a free consulting service. All resources of Ontario hydro are at the disposal of all commissions.

Any town under contract to purchase power from Ontario Hydro is compelled to form a hydro commission or a utilities commission. There's no choice.

Then this commission has the same power as is vested in any other elected municipal body. They have the authority to decide such things as rent, salaries, standards of maintenance, materials and any other things without any interference either from the council or Ontario Hydro.

The town council has authority over debenture issues and over honoraria paid commissioners. It is also explained that in theory, Ontario Hydro has final consent over all capital expenditures made by the commission, as they must approve the rates charged.

OPEN TO PUBLIC: Hydro meetings are open to the public. Few observers ever attend, and the public is generally represented by the press.

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and the
Acton Hydro Commission
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When Carol makes full use of electricity in her home dressmaking, she gets quite a bargain. Her electric sewing machine can make thousands of stitches for less than a cent's worth of electricity.

Sewing isn't the only bargain you get with electricity. Today, it has hundreds of uses that didn't exist a generation ago. Yet, surprisingly enough, the average unit cost is less now than it was then. As a matter of fact, you pay less for electricity in Ontario than you would almost anywhere else in the world. That's why electricity is the biggest bargain in your family budget.

The above example is based on the average cost to Ontario municipal residential customers of 1.13¢ net per kilowatt-hour.

The official opening of the Acton Hydro-Electric Commission's new offices on June 3rd will mark yet another part of progress — an advancement in service to help you Live Better Electrically.

