

The Canadian Champion

... And There Was Light

A brief history of electricity in Milton and its development. It is written to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Milton Hydro-Electric Commission. Copyright 1964 by The Canadian Champion, Milton, Ontario.

Prelude to Power

By Jim Dills

THE tallow candle and the coal oil lamp have given way to the magic of electricity. The changes wrought have been significant, the forces unleashed for industrial growth dramatic, and the brightly lit streets of today would be unbelievable to those who, 70 years ago, introduced the first electric street lights to the county town of Milton.

In 1889 the town was being lit with coal-oil lamps — about 40 of them — strategically located in the town whose confines were considerably more restricted than the town of today.

Each night the village constable made his rounds, filling and lighting the coal oil lamps for which he earned \$1 a day. Carrying the ladder was part of his job, although in Oakville the constable tired of this part of the task and a newspaper reports his solution: "Oakville, like Toronto, covers a very considerable area in proportion to population. Like Toronto, also, the streets running through the cow pastures adjoining the village are illuminated, but in the case of Oakville coal oil takes the place of the flaming electric light as an illuminant. The duty of lighting these lamps was recently placed upon the shoulders of the town constable. The unwonted task of carrying a ladder through long miles of streets in order to reach the top of the several lamp posts soon proved too much for the town cop and he accordingly devised a scheme calculated to materially lessen his labors. This was to cut down the posts to his own height so that he could open the glass door of the lantern and light up while standing on the sidewalks."

The lights were also fair game for pranksters. One early story was recalled in Milton where youngsters extinguished one lamp and placed a cat inside the barely warmed globe. They then teased the lamp-lighting constable into returning to light the lamp. As he mounted his ladder and opened the globe the escaping cat so surprised him that he tumbled backwards from the ladder while the pranksters watched from a safe distance.

The desire of the town fathers for greater street illumination was evidenced in a number of ways. In 1899 the council instructed its fire and lamp committee to replace the existing burners on the coal-oil street lamps, with a larger burner. The larger burners were to be purchased from general merchant Conway whose tender for them had been the lowest.

There had been some complaints, too, about the darkness in front of the town hall and councillors agreed in January of 1890 to purchase a Globe Tubular Lamp and place it in position to light the entrance.

But still the town councillors were undoubtedly eyeing with a little envy the "flaming electric light" that was being used in the cities. Perhaps that is why the offer of the Edison Electric Light Co., in September 1890, to light the town of Milton, was received with mixed feelings at the local council table.

The company proposed installation of 40 incandescent lights of 32 candle power at eight cents per light per night, with the town furnishing the lamps at a cost of about \$4 each.

The proposition was considered by the committee but with a cautious eye at the proposal, they recommended it be deferred until the town had an opportunity to contact other light companies. It wasn't a unanimous opinion of council though, and councillors G. A. Hemstreet and R. Ramshaw, seeing the advantages of electric light here, pressed for action on the firm's offer. They wanted the town to give Edison a five year contract for four 2,000 candle power arc lights and four 32 candle power incandescent lights for 150 nights each year at \$1.50 each night. Their efforts were unsuccessful, however, and though nothing further is heard of that company it was not the end.

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