

By Ray Henry Town of Canandaigua Historian

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HISTORY OF ONTARIO COUNTY: The advent of ELECTRICITY in Canandaigua

We have become a culture in which electricity and the thousands of uses for it are so ingrained in our day-to-day existence that it is quite common to install whole house back-up generators to assure that we have nearly continuous electric service, uninterrupted from storms or other causes of electrical outages.

With all of our modern electrical and electronic requirements, it is interesting to note that the first commercial production of electricity in Canandaigua and Ontario County was NOT primarily for residential purposes.

Village life

Early residential use in Canandaigua in the late 19th century was purely secondary, and the first residential application was for home lighting — usually one light in each room, often with pull-string or push-button switches — and required only a couple of 15-amp fuses, as very few electric appliances had been developed yet. The majority of lighting prior to this time was by kerosene or manufactured gas.

By 1886 the Canandaigua Water Company, a private company, was supplying Canandaigua Lake water to the village by way of a 14-inch intake pipe from the lake to a pumping station located where the old “Red Jacket Park” was located, now the site of the New York State Boat Launch. A Worthington Pump supplied 1.25 million gallons per day through a 12-inch water main up Main Street. By 1892, the Canandaigua Electric Light Company had put an addition on the west side of the Water Company’s building and was supplying electric carbon arc street lighting to some portions of the village, presumably Main Street and perhaps the Pier. The power was generated by steam from the Water Company. The venture was obviously unsuccessful as, according to the 1897 Sanborn Insurance Maps, the west part of the building was already vacant.



A power turbine at the South Main Street generation plant. RAY HENRY COLLECTION

The Canandaigua Street Railway Company started a horse/mule-drawn street car service in May of 1886. By July of 1893, the franchise and rolling stock were sold to the Canandaigua Electric Light and Railway Company, which started the fully electric trolley system that serviced the village only. This was powered by a hydro-electric plant located on the Canandaigua Outlet in Littleville, a hamlet in the Town of Hopewell. The power lines traveled the Route 21 corridor and entered the village in the Gorham and East Street area. A limited number of homes were served by these power lines.

This endeavor was very successful, and by 1900 the company had been taken over by the Ontario Light and Traction Company. In 1901, the Rochester and Eastern Rapid Railway was organized, with headquarters in Canandaigua and a plan to build an electric trolley from Rochester to Canandaigua and from Canandaigua to Geneva. In 1903, the Ontario Light and Traction Company was taken over by the R&ERR, which built an extensive car barn and coal/coke-fired generation plant on South Main Street at what is now the old Wegmans site.

The R&ERR peaked in popularity during World War I and started to decline during the 1920s due to: the company’s refusal to charge progressively higher rates; the overburdening of the franchise’s structures from aging; the tremendous drop-off of usage due to the Depression; and the greatest reason — competition from the automobile.

By the turn of the century many homes and commercial enterprises were being served with electricity and manufactured gas. And by 1922, residential availability and use of electricity in the home had begun to expand. It was about that time that transmission lines from the Niagara Mohawk lines in Farmington were extended to the City of Canandaigua, to the switching station at Gorham and East streets.

Rural electrical use

Although nearly 90 percent of urban dwellers had electricity by the 1930s, only 10 percent of rural dwellers did. Private utility companies, which supplied electric power to most of the nation's consumers, argued that it was too expensive to string electric lines to isolated rural farmsteads. They claimed “most farmers are too poor to be able to afford electricity.” Their belief was that they would never recoup the expense of building the lines, based on how little energy the farmers would use. They also argued that the farmers themselves would not want utility-supplied electricity on their farms.

Many family farms before Rural Electrification used windmills and batteries for lighting and pumping requirements. And many were even using wind-powered battery chargers. Milking was by hand. Milk-bottling plants were powered by gasoline-powered hit-and-miss engines that drove jack axles and belts that operated cream separators. Ice kept the day’s milk cool.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the Rural Electrification Act in 1935. FDR’s gamble on Rural Electrification was that electricity on the farm made life easier for the farmer as well as his wife, and would produce many manufacturing jobs as well.

To answer the question of whether the farmers would want electricity brought to the farm, in more than one interview with farmers who lived through those times, I was told that the electric crews had the location for poles staked along the road, and when the crews went home in the evening, the farmers would spend a good part of the evening digging holes so the crews could just commence setting poles in the morning. Engineers would stake the location of more

poles, and the farmers would go back to digging each evening.

The availability of electricity to the farmers meant the capability of purchasing automatic milkers, lighting and other equipment, which spawned the growth of the milking parlor. For the farm wife, electricity meant better refrigeration, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, freezers and other appliances.

Even the most remote farms had access to electricity by the mid-1950s, ending the need for the wind generator. Many farmers on Middle Cheshire Road, Route 21 South and West Lake Road did not receive public electricity until the late 1940s.

The 1950s brought the age of televisions and other time-saving and entertainment opportunities. And so the rapid growth commenced.

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