

Historical Highlight

Sand Lake Historical Society

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The Wynantskill Hydro-Electric Co. — as I saw it grow D. Robert Hastings

[Originally copied by Stanley Buck on February 29, 1988, from notes by Mr. Hastings.]

The first I remember of electric lights was when I was about four years old. We moved from Troy where my father was a steam and electric plant engineer for the United Traction Co. and Troy-New England Railway Companies. He had taken courses in Electrical Engineering from I.C.S. (International Correspondence School?)

He got the idea of electric lights for West Sand Lake and figured out how he could harness his father's grist and cider mill water wheel to drive a generator. The mill had a large vertical Leffel water wheel with a gear-driven horizontal shaft. He purchased a large wooden flywheel and a 50 kw (50,000 watts) and a separate exciter (2,300 volts — 3 phase). He bought a one-panel switch board with ammeters, a voltmeter and an oil switch.

Building a small addition to the grist mill, he put the generator and equipment in the lower floor and a small room on the 2nd floor for an office. This was, I believe, in 1910. This was done during the *daytime* while still working *nights* at the railway power house.



Once satisfied with the operation of the generator, he had a local farmer cut some *chestnut* poles and, obtaining a franchise to set poles along the highway, he built a line to the four corners of West Sand Lake and hung a small transformer and a street

light. This he turned on at dark until about 11:00 p.m.

After a few days, one of the hotels on the corner applied for service. The hotel was wired and connected to the line. Power was available only from dusk until 11:00 p.m., on account of the water supply from the lakes being controlled by the Burden Water Company for the mills along the Wynantskill Creek. The mills did not work nights so the water had to be stored during the day for night operation of the hydro-electric plant.



More and more people made application for lights, so the company was formed and incorporated, I believe, in 1911 and named The Wynantskill Hydro-Electric Co. Inc., with my father Clifford C. Hastings as President, his brother Douglas, who joined him as Secretary-Treasurer, and their mother as officers. My father took care of construction and wiring and my uncle took care of the finances and billing, both held other jobs as well.

To finance construction, the Company would furnish and set the poles, and the customers would furnish the wire. The business picked up quite fast, and both men only worked at other jobs part-time to take care of the new undertaking.

Power was still furnished only from dark until 11:00 p.m. three weekdays and until midnight on Saturdays. As washing machines and electric irons came on the market, power was turned on Monday morning from 7:00 a.m. until noon for washing and Tuesday from 7:00 a.m. until noon for ironing.

Every night or at any time the power was to be turned off for lack of water or for repairs, the switch was dropped three times at quick intervals — a sig-

Inside...	
From the President	3
Barbara Worcester	4
Fall Meetings/Programs	4
Editorial Ramblings	5

nal for people to light their oil lamps, for the power would be turned off in 10 minutes!

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In the winter of 1913, the ice on the pond became so thick that it forced the concrete dam out. All the water reserve was lost as, of course, was the power. I was old enough then to know that my father was disheartened, but then only until he had time to think things over.

The next day, he went to a friend of his who did threshing at the different farms and had a horse-drawn portable steam engine. They drew the engine alongside of the mill, disconnected the water wheel and belted the engine to the drive shaft. That night the lights were on as usual.

A temporary wooden dam was then built ahead of the old dam and water was again used while the concrete dam was rebuilt. All materials had to be drawn in by horse and wagon from Troy, which was a day's trip. So things were a lot slower than today.

That summer was the start of my employment. Of course, being about seven years old I had to be around where things were happening. In order to get stone for the new dam, a flat-bottomed barge was built to pole up and down the creek and load with stone from along the shore. In one corner of the barge was an old-fashioned pitcher pump to take care of leakage in the barge. To keep me from being underfoot, I was elected to man the pump. That took about all summer. In the meantime, the mills were not used for grinding grist or making cider. The stones and equipment were removed and sold to make room for a storeroom.

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Expansion went on to Averill Park, Sand Lake, Glass Lake and Crooked Lake, all work being done from a one-horse line wagon.

When I was about 12 or 13 years old, I would spend my Saturdays on the line with my father and the boys on the line or at the plant. Noontime or whenever available I would put on a pair of oversized hooks and climb a few poles. My dad would watch me, and when I would cut out all he would say was to keep my ass behind me.

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That kind of service went on until 1922. No power after midnight except Monday and Tuesday mornings. Wynantskill in meantime tried to get the Troy Gas Company to extend their lines to sparsely settled areas. They refused and Wynantskill Hydro took the

franchise in the Town of North Greenbush. Lines were extended to Snyders Lake and Wynantskill.

In 1922, Rensselaer County built a new TB hospital complex (Pawling Sanitorium) and made application for service. To take care of this, the old cider mill was cleaned out and a coal-fired steam boiler installed. A horizontal Westinghouse steam engine and another 50kw, 2,300 volt generator was installed to pick up the load on weekends and times of water shortage. A three-phase line was built cross-country from the line on Route 150 across Route 66 to the hospital.

At about this time, the Thermo Mills of West Sand Lake made application for power, but equipment was not large enough to take them on without making many changes and it was refused. The Albany and Southern Railroad Company built a 13,200 volt transmission line cross-country to the Thermo Mills. This infringed on the Wynantskill Hydro's franchise as it went through both Sand Lake and North Greenbush. They were taken to court and as a settlement the Albany and Southern agreed to build a substation and furnish backup power to Wynantskill Hydro. This then allowed Wynantskill Hydro to take on most any new load by just increasing copper and transformer size.

Twenty-four hour attendance was now necessary, so a cot was put in the office upstairs. My uncle, being very inventive, built a voltage regulator consisting of two magnets. He disconnected the governor on the water wheel, which operated too slowly in opening and closing the water gates. He then installed an automobile starter motor on the gates of the water wheel. When the voltage dropped, the motor quickly opened the gates. When the load dropped, it quickly closed them. He also built an alarm system in the office so if anything happened when sleeping, a bell woke you up. The alarm consisted of a solenoid magnet energized by 110-volt power. A bell, powered by a storage battery, was installed in the office. When power went off, the magnet holding a condenser dropped, closing the circuit and causing the alarm to sound. Thus whoever was on duty could get his night's sleep.

My father operated Monday, every other Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. My uncle worked the other nights. If either wanted a night off, I was elected. From 1924-26 when I was in high school, my father's health was not up to par, so I took my books and did my homework when taking over his shift.

In 1926, the business was sold to the Associated Gas and Electric Company and later to New York State Electric and Gas. 1



From the President

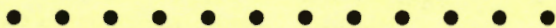
Presidential Blurb

No, this is not a blurb! This is an alert! Last year our membership voted a new constitution and a 16-member Board of Trustees dedicated to the welfare of the Sand Lake Historical Society and its purposes. Ideas, talent and enthusiasm abound — time and energy do not, and so we must call on each member to do a little bit of what he or she does best.

And, we must focus special attention and enthusiasm on **membership**. Indeed, membership dues constitute about one-third of our income. More importantly, it is through increasing our members that we can have a pool of talent to provide special programs on local history for our schools, engage in oral history projects, take part in planning our popular house tours, gather and preserve artifacts and information, and underwrite projects that do not support themselves.

This year, let us make sure that the neighbor, friend or relative who enjoys history and would enjoy the company of others who share a love of history is invited to, telephoned about, brought to our special programs. This includes the members who have drifted away. We miss them!

In keeping with this idea, will each one receiving this newsletter take a moment to think about that special someone that you know and hand him or her the enclosed invitation to come out to our meeting on September 13. Please offer to bring or come to the meeting with those persons and help them connect with members whose historical interests are similar.



September is the last month that your name will be retained on the membership rolls if you haven't paid your dues (\$5.00) for 1994-95. Only paid-up members will receive *Historical Highlights*. You won't want to miss a word of the four issues that Coul Wescott and his Publications Committee put together (especially if he writes as "spicey" as he talks!).

— Dianne Freeman

The Greenbush Historical Society has just published their fourth edition of *Looking Back — A History of Troy and Rensselaer County*. The book is available through Rensselaer County historical societies and in local bookstores.

Barbara Worcester

Long ago, a wise man explained to me
when I asked, why a young friend who
had so much to offer died.

He pointed to his flower garden and
asked, if you wanted to pick a bouquet
which would you pick — the flowers or
the weeds?

The flower was my answer.

Barbara was our flower, talented —
a quilter — painter — rughooker —
master gardener.

Friendly — interested in helping other
people, her work with older people.

The years of teaching.

Barbara has left us for awhile
until we all meet again.

— Judy Rowe



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Fall Meetings/Programs

■ **September 13:** *Fascinating Dolls of Yesteryear.* Anne Legenbauer of Poestenkill, a well-known doll collector, will display dolls from her collection and tell how the hobby of collecting dolls can be fun as well as educational. She will discuss varieties, shapes and sizes of dolls, and how they can grow in value as an investment for the future. Bring your own dolls for display; please write a short "history" of each doll to be displayed on a small card.

■ **October 11:** *Scavenger for History.* John Scherer of the New York State Museum will present a slide show with anecdotes and the stories behind the finding and collecting of artifacts for the Museum.

■ **November 8:** *Readings from World War I Diaries* — presented by Alan Fuess. We are looking for World War I posters, pictures, patches, medals and other artifacts for display that evening.

All meetings begin at 8:00 p.m. at the Sand Lake Town Hall, Route 43, Sand Lake.

Editorial Ramblings

Another year, another season. Hope your summer was as great as mine. Daphne learned to waterski on her left nostril and is recovering all 'round...real fine!

Your Society has a fine new constitution this season due to the endocrine sweat and tears by that hard rock trio, the *BIM BAMS* (note: NOT the *BIMBOS*): Eleanor Zaki, Rosemary Supkis and Dianne Freeman, all fresh back from Woodstock. They put in lots of hard, grinding work and deserve our thanks and support for a great job! It will guide us well in future operations, I promise.

As usual, our meetings will take place the second Tuesday of every month. Our first kickoff will be September 13. It will be nice to see you there with a neighbor or friend...but if you have no friends, come anyway. I need a friend; I'll be yours — if you promise no hanky-panky!

— Coul Westcott

