Early Gas Industry in Nanaimo

William Barraclough

It is my intention after presenting the article on the early gas industry in Nanaimo to continue with the subject of light, with a paper concerning the first electrical generation in Nanaimo to produce light also. These two systems of producing light became so interwoven between the years 1880, 1890, and 1891. First with the rivalry to produce the most satisfactory street lighting in Nanaimo, and later, as they became merged under one management.

I presented a paper on the history of the development of electricity in Nanaimo before the Historical Society in St. Paul's Hall, on January the 20th, 1954. And in going over the script, to bring it up to date with the added information required during the past 12 years, the article became too long to be dealt with at this time along with the article on the gas. I much prefer to present it, Mr. President, at some future date, provided I get invited to do so.

Now my subject concerns one of man's prime requisites of living, namely, light. One of the first acts of creation, as in the Book of Genesis, said, "Let there be light." But it would be futile attempt to compare artificial light to that of sunlight. But man-made light has been, and is one of the cheap necessities, for his existence.

Through the ages, man has devised various methods to make light. Such as rush lamps, candles, oil flares, etc. And putting all these methods away, I come to the history of making, or the processing, of modern light in Nanaimo.

One of Nanaimo's earliest industries concerned the making of coal gas for lighting our streets. Material from my talk was obtained from a variety of sources, including the files at Nanaimo Free Press, much of it taken from the City of Nanaimo council meeting records, and from personal interviews with people who had some knowledge of the time of the gas plant was in operation.

Now the founding committee from promoting the industry, I cannot find, there was no record of any committee, shall we call them the founding committee. But, the founding committee must have requested Mayor Mark Bate to go to Victoria to enter into an agreement with the British Columbia Construction Company to build and establish a gasworks at Nanaimo. For searching through the files of the Free Press, I uncovered this item concerning that establishment of the gasworks. It's dated Saturday, February the 2nd, 1886.

Quote:
A telegram received from Victoria last evening from Mayor Bate states the B.C. Construction Company have executed the agreement to establish gasworks in this city and supply the citizens with gas. No doubt the company will at once commence operations as by the agreement, the works are to be completed and gas furnished by October 31st, 1886. Start on the erection of the gasworks building was September 14th, 1886.

Now, like all projects, or most projects, the construction company encountered some difficulties to meet the date of October 31st. For at another city council meeting of Wednesday, January the 5th in '87, a communication was read from Mr. Milne, Secretary of the British Columbia Construction Company, stating that owing to unavoidable delay in procuring the pipes and retorts, the company would not be able to complete the gasworks by December 31st, and asked for an extension of time for one month. Also, that the company had decided to put in new, iron street lamps in place of the poles at present in use.

Now, what would we give to have one of those iron gas standards today? Where are they? Wouldn't that be a souvenir today?

5:26

The communication was received, thanking the construction company for their liberality in placing the new, iron street lamps. At this same council meeting of January the 5th, 1887, an amendment to extend the time for completing the gasworks to February 28th, are dealt with. And on motion of Councillor J. Hilbert, the amendment passed its first, second, and third reading. Boy, they hurried things along, didn't they? Three readings in one night!

May I digress, just briefly, from the subject of light, because reading the minutes of the council meeting of January the 5th, 1887, I came across two little items that I think they are worth repeating. Amongst the accounts passed for payment were two interesting items: one for A.G. Horne and Son for $5.00 and one for Jesse Sage for $43.00. Now Jesse Sage, he was a Princess Royal passenger. He died here in Nanaimo in 1910, but Jesse Sage figured in so many council meetings through the next 2 or 3 years that I have followed, as a, must have been a small contractor, for he one particularly put the flume under Albert Street. I don't know where the flume is today. And he worked away on the cliff. He lived for some years where the high-rise is today. That was in the house, in the clubhouse, that the Hudson's Bay Company built to entertain their officials, when they came to Nanaimo. There was a clubhouse, right where the high-rise is now, and Jesse Sage lived there for some years.

Now, to Mr. A.G. Horne, he arrived on this coast in the ship Tory, in 1901. No, he died in 1901. Mr. A.G. Horne, who was storekeeper at Nanaimo for the Hudson's Bay Company in 1851. And later, building his own place of business in 1863, and the building was situated near the present federal building, as a matter of fact, it was just at the top of the old CPR
ramp and that was his store. It was used afterwards as a courthouse, later as a jail, and there are pictures of the site extant today, showing the white picket fence all around it. But that was, the building itself, was Mr. A.G. Horne's first store.

8:24

I cannot find any record of the progress made in constructing the gas plant, there just isn't anything anywhere. I've almost made this paper out of thin air, but I am giving you the best I can. The Free Press files for Wednesday, January 19th in 1887, reporting for the big day of January the 15th, they had headlines in the Free Press, three big headlines. It said, "Turn on the gas. May its light never grow dim. City lighted with gas." That took up right at the top of the paper.

Now, Mr. Bate, here's something else for you. On Saturday, the 15 of January, 1887, at 1 p.m., Mayor Bate, Mr. R. Gibson, Mayor-Elect, and Councillors W.E. Webb, J. Hilbert, A.G. Horne, G. Bevilockway, C. Wilson, and Messrs. R. Craig and R. Aitkin, Councillors-elect, assembled at the Nanaimo Gasworks, Bridge Street, for the purpose of assisting in turning on the gas to the City of Nanaimo.

Now, these gentlemen must have been an amiable lot. When you think we had the mayor, the mayor-elect, and the councillors, and councillors-elect all at one ceremony. It just wouldn't make sense today, would it? However, the party was received at the works, by Mr. J.L. Stamford, the engineer who had erected the plant, and the gasometer was filled to capacity with 12,500 cubic feet of gas, and coal was used from Number One Mine.

Would that be a lot of gas, Mr. ...?

[unidentified male]
That would be quite a...

William Barraclough
12,500 cubic ...

Now, here's an interesting item. The ceremony of turning on the gas was done by His Worship Mayor Bate and Mr. R. Gibson, the mayor-elect. Now, did they both take a hand at the wheel to turn on the gas? Or did one turn it on and turn it off, and then the other? Wouldn't it be interesting to know just how they both helped to turn on the gas? And it was announced that the City of Nanaimo had ample resources at their command, and Saturday evening the gas was lighted in nearly all the business houses in the city. And to Mr. A.G. Horne and Son belonged the honour of getting the first light.
Oh, that would be reasonable, he was an alderman, and built his store there, so, that's what it said there. Now, the change from coal oil lamps was a marked improvement, and it was expected that street lamps would soon be lighted.

I was informed by Mr. W. Lewis the lamps were of a lantern, square type. I have a picture here that you can see later. There is one of the original, iron gas lamps, with the arms on. It's the only picture that I've been able to find. It was an open gas flame, he said.

Mr. Tom Miller, who acted as night watchman for the business houses, went around about dusk with a ladder, to light the lamps. And Mr. Lewis said he leaned his ladder against these cross arms here, and [blew match] gas light. He remembers that. Mr. Lewis had worked sometime, Mr. Abrams at the store, at the corner of Commercial and Skinner Streets, were Mr. Abrams had a general store. And there he assisted in servicing 14 coal oil lamps every day to light the store. The iron light standards, he said, came from Victoria.

And Mr. George Norris, remember him Mr. Norris? A Mr. W.K. Leighton, Mr. Hilbert, were shareholders. At present, I haven't been able to find any other names, but they will turn up.

**12:44**

At a city council meeting, Wednesday, February the 9th, 1887, tenders were received for getting the city hall equipped to use gas lights. From Mr. O'Donahue, $95.00 and from Mr. J.H. Place, $78.50. Pleece or Place?

[unidentified female]
Place.

William Barraclough
The Place was accepted and Mr. Place, he conducted a hardware shop right on down the Crescent, that's right. And he was a great advertiser in the paper.

At a city council meeting of February the 9th, 1887, Wednesday, June the 8th, 1887, accounts passed for payment by council: the gas company, this might interest you, Miss [inaudible]. gas company for lighting the council chamber, $1.30 [laughter].

[unidentified male]
That was a good price!

William Barraclough
The city hall: $4.45. And the street lamps, that were installed at that date, $75 for the month. The open gas flame lights at this time were being replaced with mantle type
burners, and speaking to a few citizens who were here and saw the changeover from the open gas light, to the mantle, they thought it was a wonderful improvement.

Then we have another account, here, I found a little later, on the September of the same year. Street lighting, it was later in the year, yet the street lighting is in half, $38.40. I think I'll catch up on why that was in a moment. The upstairs hall, wouldn't that be the council hall upstairs in the old, opposite the theatre, there?

[unidentified woman]
Yes, it was upstairs.

William Barraclough
Upstairs. It was $1.30. And the main hall, where all the work was done, $7.95, and the fire engine house was $5.25, that would be where Walls & Bradshaw's is today, that's right.

14:48

On June the 2nd, 1888, the gas company declared a 7% dividend on the stock. That was pretty good in one year's operations. In letters to the council, February 27th, 1888, they suggested street lamps be replaced at the corner of Wentworth and Selby, the corner of Haliburton and Farquhar, corner of Fry and Farquhar, Lubbock Square, where we already have a gas light at present, Prideaux at the cutting of Fitzwilliam, anyone can remember Fitzwilliam Street being cut down there? It was cut down. It says, "at the cutting", I wasn't here. However, there was a note that said that other locations that the council would suggest would be considered, so that's as far as I could get on that one.

Complaints of poor street lighting were reported at council meetings over long periods. It lasted for about two years. Also poor pressure for domestic use is reported. The distribution system began to deteriorate after time. When at a city council meeting on November 24th, 1891, several reports, complaints of defective gas lighting were considered. And why all the street lights were not regularly lighted. The council notified the gas company that street lights would not be required after December 31st.

Now, all the trouble of the street lights being out could not be blamed on the gas company, for I have heard from people who know, that just as soon as the lamplighter was out of sight, young boys would shimmy up the gas standards and turn out the lights. So, the gas company were not to blame for those.

However, electric lights were first used on the streets of Nanaimo on the 23rd of November, 1891. Four years after the gasworks was established in 1886, a new competition for light and power was organized here in 1890, called the Nanaimo Electric Light, Power, and Heating Company. And the inroads electric light had made to replace gas lighting would have influenced the city council to cancel the gas lighting on city streets. And so here are a
few assorted items that just follow on as much of the information I've been able to get, about the gas plant.

Mr. Albert Edward Mainwaring bought out the declining gasworks, and his son William, or Billy Mainwaring, as we was known, and is still known, to Nanaimo people, assisted in the operation. He was a young chap working around the plant at the time his father bought out the gasworks. The business proved to be a poor investment, owing to the run down condition of the service lines. Then Billy Mainwaring, as you know, joined the Northern Electric Company of Vancouver, afterwards becoming a very prominent in the B.C. Electric Company and other promotional developments in British Columbia.

18:20

An electric company headed by Mr. Joseph Hunter, civil engineer, Victoria, which had previously acquired the original electric system bought out the gasworks in 1891. That's what I was trying to say in the first place, the two systems are really one continued story. And they wrap, and they cross one another, that it’s so difficult to sort them out, to make it one item. However, I would be glad to give you the electric some other time.

Mr. William Lewis, who was manager of the electric company, was made manager of the gasworks also. The electric company operated the gas system for two years, and then owing to leaky service lines, twice as much gas was being manufactured as sold to customers. Resulting in the gasworks being closed down.

I might say that all the gas lines are still being dug up in the city streets, I saw one just quite recently, being dug up on Skinner Street, in the old Gough house, Hiram? I saw a gas line being dug up into the old Gough house on Skinner Street, not too long ago, right. And I'm glad to tell our gasman here that they have the new gas in that same house today.

Mr. Piper salvaged some ornamental gas fixtures for the new museum, that's some of the props we have here, to kind of get the atmosphere for the area, or the period we guess was in use. When the south approach to the Pearson Bridge was being built in 1954, I saw a large bull dozer unearth the old gasometer. It had been buried under several feet of fill through the years. And the bull dozer, he was quite surprised, when this huge round base of the gasometer came. So we knew exactly where it was, it was just right in the middle of the road, on the approach to the bridge.

Interviewing Miss Mary Freeman at her home on Pine Street on Monday, October 17th, this year, concerning her association with the gas company. The Electric Light Company, I was informed. A Mr. Thomas was the manager of the gasworks before it was sold to Mr. Mainwaring. Mr. Thomas was working on an idea to patent that was considered a great improvement in the use of gas other than for lighting. Billy Mainwaring was employed as a handyman around the gasworks, doing a variety of jobs, and he, knowing the project Mr.
Thomas was working on, it is thought that he influenced his father to buy out the gasworks, which any one that knows Mainwaring, I think there's a lot in that. Miss Freeman being bookkeeper for Hemans and Mainwarings, which was sold to Pat Burns and Company, May the 20th, 1912, went as Mr. Mainwaring's office assistant at the gasworks. And when the Nanaimo Electric Company bought out the gasworks, Mr. Lewis asked Miss Freeman to work for them at their office, attending to both sets of books, until the gas accounts were cleared away.

Now, I asked Miss Freeman where the office, was it at the plant? Or where? She said there was a little office at the plant, but only in the first gas company, but when Mr. Mainwaring bought it out, he rented a little space at the Davenport, on Commercial Street. He had a little office in there. I haven't passed anything up at all, I assure you that I could get my hands on.

Now here is an item I found very amusing, made possible with gas light. On Saturday, May the 10th, 1888, a prize fight was staged under the gas lights in front of the parked area on Wallace Street. Now, I hope somebody tells me where that is.

Constable Tom O'Connell came on the scene during the second round. There was a good crowd of men, but he stopped the fight. That was from the gaslight. There is a house on Nob Hill still called the Tom O'Connell house. Yeah.

Now the gasworks was used for the relief of young people suffering from whooping cough. The children sat there for long periods. And speaking to a medic a few days ago, he stated, "The humid, warm vapour from the coal tar could have been beneficial, but he'd never heard of it." Well, most of our doctors are young people, and none of them have never seen gasworks, so I don't suppose he'd be acquainted with it.

[unidentified female]
I was one of the victims.

William Barraclough
Did they? There we are...that's fine.

[unidentified female]
I remember that, I cried.

William Barraclough
Now, people, as I said, it would take about 20 minutes to deliver this paper, which I think is just about right. And this so little, this one of the few pictures I've been able to get with a gas light, and this was the year when they cancelled the light I presume and went to electricity, for there's an arc light on there too.
I'll pass it around for you to see. There's the two lights on that one picture, and that would be the year when they cancelled the gas contract and went to electric.

Well, this is taken from the new CPR terminal.

[background discussion]

Ladies and gentleman, that completes my paper.

Alan Burdock
I am sure, Mr. Barraclough, that everyone here thoroughly enjoyed this remarkable paper on a forgotten era. When I mention that, the gasworks of course, was a part of our history. And although we do now find odd evidence, when they are digging, they dig up the odd main or gas pipe. But apart from that there is very little to show, and very little history left. The research that you've done on this is remarkable, with so little to go on. So thank you once again, Mr. Barraclough, for a very fine paper.

William Barraclough
Thank you very much, Mr. Burdock. The pleasure, I assure you, has been mine. I've enjoyed every minute of the research, and I am so pleased that the paper has been accepted, received by the gathering here this evening. Thank you again, Mr. President.

25:46

[end of recording]