

The Fight for Light

WHEN THE St. Andrews Land Company came to town in 1888, proposing in conjunction with its plans for a large hotel, cottage development and golf course, to provide the town with running water and the electric light, tremendous hope was raised in the hearts of those who wanted dear, decrepit old St. Andrews to move boldly forward into the 19th century.

A form of modern light had been gifted the town a few years earlier when Lady Tilley, wife of Sir Leonard Tilley, a summer resident since 1872, had generously petitioned the ladies of Carleton, Saint John, to provide the town with 20 gasoline lanterns and posts. These were set up in July 1886, and Lady Tilley was serenaded with a brass band outside her home at Linden Grange. The good lady, not content with this, petitioned the ladies of St. Andrews to stage a series of fund-raising tea parties for the requisite gasoline to light them for five months. "These ladies," enthused the **Bay Pilot**, "are light and sunshine to very many hearts, and without them the town would be dark indeed. Like the wise virgins of olden time, they are determined to get oil for the lamps, and who remembering what befell the foolish virgins, will refuse aid to the St. Andrews ladies to escape such a sad fate."

Alas a sad fate was waiting down the street, for after the first five months ran out, so did the interest of the townspeople in renewing the subscription. In the spring of 1889, the **St. Andrews Beacon**, newly arrived on the scene, noted sadly that "At the present time, the sun by day, the moon by night, and the **Beacon** at weekly intervals, are the only illuminators that St. Andrews possesses."

In 1889 an American company came to St. Andrews to attempt to install electricity but nothing came of this scheme either. In 1905 a Light Club was formed and the town considered the possibility of creating a tax for the purpose of installing electricity, but these seeds also fell on stony soil. Other towns forged ahead. By 1888, Eastport, Calais, and St. Stephen had electric lighting. In 1905 Digby and little Montague, PEI with a population of only 750, shone incandescently, but the streets of St. Andrews shone through a lamp glass darkly.

Not everyone was in favour of progress. In 1906, by a vote of ninety to eighty, the townspeople decided against an electric street lighting system, considering other problems such as the water supply more important. In 1907, newly possessed of the St. Andrews Land Company and Algonquin Hotel, the CPR submitted an estimate for an electric plant that would light the town and railway station in conjunction with its own properties. The plant would cost the town \$17,000. Twenty arc lights for the streets would be supplied for \$80 each year and incandescent lights would cost \$30 each. Nothing came of this scheme and by 1909 the CPR had decided to finish the job without the town.

When in July 1909, the switch was thrown and the Algonquin was flooded with the marvellous new Edison light from its recently installed powerhouse, the townspeople must have gazed on its brilliance with mixed feelings. They would have had to wander home along streets lit by oil lamps so dim that when the lamppost outside his office got a new coat of white paint, editor Broad of the **Beacon** thought it threw more brilliance than the lamp itself, which he likened to the “darkness visible” of Milton’s Hell.

The Algonquin was the means by which the cottages in the immediate vicinity also acquired their electricity. C.R. Hosmer had electric lights installed in his summer home next to the hotel as did F.W. Thompson and Jeremiah Smith. In 1913 the Algonquin was able to boast an electrically-lighted bowling green, and in 1916 a series of arc lights were installed in the streets approaching the hotel. A walk through the town at night, Broad commented, now gave a splendid object lesson which might be titled *Lights, Ancient and Modern*. There were the gasoline lights of the stores, what he sarcastically called the dazzling brilliance of the street oil lamps, and the Algonquin’s new arc lights.

In 1919 the formation of the St. Andrews Electric Light and Power Company created a breakthrough. The company was incorporated in June 1920 with A.W. Mason, the chief engineer at the Algonquin, as president, and Syd Anning, a local resident, as manager. Once an agreement had been made between the town and the company to provide electricity and to exempt the company from taxes for ten years, the Power Company established a contract with the CPR in

September to buy surplus electricity from the hotel's powerhouse for four cents per kilowatt hour. By November, thirty-nine street lights were in place at a cost of \$9,600. This gave the town lighted streets for six hours daily every day of the year and, while not impressive today, it was light years ahead of anything the town had known to this point.

Almost immediately there were problems with rate increases. The CPR advised that it had to raise the rate charged to the Power Company by some fifty percent due to repairs caused by the continuous service now being provided and due to legislative change requiring the presence of a qualified worker when the plant was operating. This was well above the agreed upon rate scheme, and further rate increases passed on to the users by the Power Company in 1927 caused the town to ask the New Brunswick Public Utilities Board to look into the matter. The Board's report in August 1928 concluded that the current rate should stay in place but urged the Power Company to find other sources of power.

In 1929 the CPR tore down the old powerhouse on Carleton Street because, despite expansions over the years, it no longer met the combined demands of the hotel and town. In its place it built the half-timbered building which still stands today and is now called Matthews House after Wes Matthews, chief engineer in the 1960s. Despite the increased capacity of the new facility, the Power Company argued that it was still insufficient to provide enough power for the town and proposed to build an oil-fired generating station for the town for \$30,000 in exchange for a twenty-five-year franchise. The town declined this proposal but approved the merger of the Power Company with the Associated Gas and Electric System of New England, which, somewhat misleadingly, offered reduced rates. By 1931 power lines had been run down the St. Croix from St. Stephen and the Algonquin, as a supplier of power at least, was out of the town's hair.