

FAIRPORT MUNICIPAL COMMISSION

Part one of three

Just over one hundred and ten years ago, John Stebbins, Charles Kinney, and James Root, among others, were making their daily rounds cleaning, filling, lighting, and extinguishing Fairport's oil lamps. Cleaning and filling the lamps with kerosene required one or two visits, lighting another, and extinguishing a final trip. The village lamplighters were appointed by the village Board of Trustees, but also made a little extra cash by carrying a supply of kerosene that they sold to householders. It was said that both Charles Kinney and James Root had horses that knew the route so well that they would go on to the next lamp if they felt that their masters were taking too long with the cleaning and filling. It was also about one hundred years ago that Levi J. DeLand installed electric lighting in the business district, sounding the death knell for the era of lamplighters and kerosene in Fairport.

From the earliest days of electricity, specifically since 1882 when Thomas Edison pioneered centralized electric service at his Pearl Street Station in New York, there have been both public and privately owned electric utility companies. Private utilities, as profit-making concerns that exist in part to satisfy stockholders, tended to concentrate their efforts around densely populated areas. Rural towns had to produce their own power or go without. The resulting public or municipal utilities that were created are locally owned and operated by the citizens of the community they serve and are not profit making entities. Fairport Electric has, for example, one stockholder, the village of Fairport. As a booklet published by the American Public Power Association puts it, "public ownership of a utility is like owning your own home. Private ownership is like renting it."

The United States is one of only a few industrialized countries to maintain a mix of both public and privately owned utilities; most others consider electric service along with postal, highway, sewer, and water services to be a governmental obligation. As of 2010, there are over 2,000 community owned electric utilities in the nation, of which 51 are in New York, including, in addition to Fairport, Churchville and Spencerport in Monroe County. The benefits of public power include lower rates and more efficient service than is usually provided by private concerns. Local control means that the utility works in concert with the community to achieve long-term goals. These benefits also tend to attract significant business and industrial development.

The State Legislature passed a law in 1875 allowing villages to "furnish pure and wholesome water to the inhabitants thereof," and another law in 1894 that authorized villages to "furnish electric light or gas light" to residents. Fairport taxpayers had authorized a municipal water system in the spring of 1893 and appointed a commission to oversee it. In January of 1901, Fairport officials constructed a municipal electric plant and began to generate electricity under the jurisdiction of a Board of Light Commissioners.

The final demise of the oil street lamp in Fairport was sealed with the formation on March 12, 1901, of the Fairport Municipal Commission, which would henceforth oversee both water and electricity systems in the village. A three-member commission, F.A. Defendorf, C.Clarence Moore, and H.H. Howell, and superintendent F.E. Pritchard were appointed by the Village Board. They borrowed \$28,000 to install a small steam generator at the water plant on what was then known as John Street (later State Street and now Liftbridge Lane), and construct a pole line to furnish power. This early plant, with a capacity of 150 kva produced by three 50 kva transformers, was able to power 20 streetlights and 40 homes daily, from one hour after sunset to one hour before sunrise. (A Kilovolt ampere, or kva, indicates the size or capacity of the transformer.) By 1905, there were 60 streetlights and 194 customers. By 1930, Fairport Electric had gone from supplying 40 homes and 20 streetlights from one hour after sunset to one hour before sunrise to serving nearly 1400 customers 24 hours a day under a contract with Niagara Mohawk Power Corporation, negotiated in 1925, to supply its power needs.

Fairport Electric finished converting to a 60-cycle system and retired its 25-cycle equipment by the middle of the 1930's. A new substation was built about 1½ miles from the village distribution center that by 1942 provided an additional 3000 kva. By this time, the commission was serving 1451 customers in Fairport village and 449 in the Town of Perinton and had distribution lines that covered 13 miles of village streets and 35 miles of rural highway. Production of kwh increased about sixfold between 1922 and 1942. In 1949 another substation was opened in the Egypt area that provided an additional 750 kva of power.

Between 1957 and 1961, the Power Authority of the State of New York (PASNY) constructed two major hydroelectric plants, one on the St. Lawrence River and one at Niagara Falls. An agreement between PASNY and municipal utilities like Fairport Electric allotted municipal utilities and rural electrical cooperatives 50% of the new hydroelectric power. When the new service came on line in April of 1961, Fairport Electric was able to purchase power from the two new plants at wholesale prices, and, because it was a publicly owned utility, it was able to sell power at a lower rate than the for-profit utilities. The new hydropower agreement made it possible to reduce Fairport Electric rates by about 10%.

To be continued



Fairport Municipal Commission workers in the 1930's