

That's all I remember about the different jobs I had, but someday I'll tell you some stories that are dillies about the undertaking business, if you want.

Notes on Lamplighting, Et Cetera

by Miriam E. Bixler

Interviews

Mother's brother, James Kautz, remembers that there were a few remaining oil lamps in Lancaster's back alleys when he stopped lighting gas lamps about 1907. These, of course, were beyond the reach of gas lines. Uncle James can still picture an old fellow called "Stumpy" carrying his ladder under his stump arm. He'd use the good left hand to light the oil lamp with a torch that burned constantly as he went along his route. Always faithful, he never missed a day.

Uncle James confirms, "I lit lamps every night, moonlight or not. How well I know! Around 1910 an automatic, electric method of lighting gas lamps was introduced. However, I know that there were still some gas routes in 1917."

The local United Gas Improvement Company office states that after lamplighters were not employed clock timers were attached to each post. These were wound exactly like a clock once each week. The switch had a halfway pull and by means of an arbor bar and chain, was rocked back and forth. Certain merchants controlled the lights of lamps on sidewalks in front of their stores. A switch would turn the flame very low during daylight and an opposite turn would light the lamp fully. An example of this sort of lamp in fine condition is in front of the home of Joseph McMichael, 25 N. Main St., Manheim. There is an old gas lamp, electrified of course, standing in the churchyard of the First Reformed Church (United Church of Christ) on N. Christian Street, Lancaster city.

Uncle James Kautz said, "Each gas lamp had a mantle which had to be replaced when worn. When I first lit lamps for your father (Abner Eyde) we used a sawed off broom stick with a notch on one end to hold a kitchen match. We'd tap open a small plate on the bottom of the cast iron lamppost, strike the match with an upward

movement of the stick, tap open a valve lever and light the gas. This was done in one continuous and unbroken movement, requiring about two seconds of time."

He continued, "Later the company prohibited the use of lighting sticks. Some of the boys—I believe it was Trimble's own sons—got into mischief. One of their tricks was to run the sticks along the iron front lawn fences which made a racket early mornings and woke folks up. Then the rule came out for us to use a four-foot ladder. Your father and I didn't go for that at all. After using the stick so long that ladder was too cumbersome and a burden. But we got used to it and liked the ladder almost as much as the stick. I remember receiving a number of compliments from folks along the way as to my speed and dexterity in performing this combination of ladder placings and lighting. I guess that was the monkey in me."

Lamps had to be out by daylight and sometimes the lamplighter would start at three A.M. in the summer. It took two hours to light the fifty-two lamps in Dad's route and one and a half hours to "outen" them.

Dad was paid fifty cents a month per light. Uncle James doesn't remember what Dad paid him but he thought it was pretty good at the time. The latter lived on St. Joseph Street west of Laurel and had quite a walk to the start of the route on W. King Street. However, if he did the whole route he ended up at his sister's (my mother's house) for supper. The route went from Charlotte and W. King up Charlotte to James, catching one light in front of Franklin and Marshall College then south on College Ave. to Columbia Ave. One deviation caught another lamp on Ruby then the route continued in town on W. King Street to Charlotte. This included all lights within this territory of course.

Rarely was a globe broken but if it did happen the gas company replaced it. They had to be washed at times but usually the rain took care of that. When the boys did wash them they carried a bucket and rags and got water from the neighborhood. They hated the time-consuming job.

Martin Zell remembers that when Lancaster installed electric lights it did not discard the old gas lights for some time. The new lights did not always work and then the gas lamps came in very handily. Mr. Zell liked to watch for the afternoon lamplighter. A lamp was placed in the middle of each block and there was one directly opposite his home on N. Mary Street, in front of number 325.

He told the story of how Dr. P. G. Sieger, Pastor of Emanuel Lutheran Church, got a lamp placed there. Dr. Sieger approached William Wetzel, Lancaster City Council Member, who lived in the five hundred block of W. Lemon Street (next to the present Smithgall's Drugstore). Mr. Wetzel got on the job and saw that an ordinance "was authorized for the city of Lancaster to install a gas light in front of every church so that people going to the House of God might

have light to see their steps. It passed both Common and Select branches and like the old laws of the Medes and the Persians cannot be repealed.

The City Clerk's office checked for the above ordinance. No information could be found either about a William Wetzel or about such an ordinance. It was recalled, however, that at one time there was a "Lamp Committee". [City directories list a William C. Wetzel, 534 W. Lemon Street, who was a partner with Frank Spicer in the housebuilding and development business.]

ET CETERA

There is an old English rhyme: "Be quick as a lamplighter sometimes we say. Here's one upon duty fast tripping away."¹

The first lamplighter was working in China around 900 to 1000 A.D. As gas escaped from the grounds it was caught in bags or bladders. When light was wanted the bags were pierced and gas escaped. Much later Genoa, Italy had the first city lighting system and in 1800 France and England began experimenting with gaslighting. This gas was made by carbonizing and distilling coal. In 1807 London's Pall Mall was lit with gas. Paris streets followed in 1820.²

Baltimore was the first American city to be lit by gaslight and other cities followed though Philadelphia was content for a long time to use whale oil fixtures Benjamin Franklin had invented. Some citizens felt gas dangerous but finally, in 1835, it was installed.

In 1848 there was excitement at the White House as President James Polk and the household staff witnessed the installation of the first gas lights in the executive mansion.

At the close of the 17th century one lantern served every seven houses for lighting in Philadelphia. Watchmen with rattle kloppers patrolled the streets with a black, brass-tipped stave, calling out at intervals, "Lanthorn and a while Candell-light. Hang out your lights." But in 1751 Philadelphia was considered the best lit city of the time because it adopted whale oil lamplighting.³

Pertinent Local Dates

1798 In that year the State Assembly generously allowed the burgesses to set up street lamps, and a half century of black-out came to an end with dim illumination of flickering lamps. However, these were extinguished on moonlight nights.⁴

In the city of Lancaster it was enacted that a number of lamps be placed in such parts of highways and streets and public alleys as seems expedient. Contracts were also to be made with any person or persons needed for the lighting, trimming, supplying and maintaining them.⁵

1842 Lancaster citizens petitioned a grant to Lancaster City Gas company for laying pipes into the city. After two years the city would have the right to purchase them. Oil dealers protested this plan so the request was "laid on the table". At a later meeting that year the petition was granted if the pipes were laid within two years. However, the city didn't install street lights for several years and then only when a special reduction in price of gas was offered.⁶

1845 Permission to install gas was voted null and void as three years had passed since it had been given.⁷

1847 The first gas made in Lancaster was manufactured by Elias Barr for the Cotton Mill #1 on South Queen Street.⁸

1849 The Lancaster Gas Company was chartered April 7, 1849.⁹

1850 Gas was introduced into the city February 21, 1850, Rosin gas works were erected at an original cost of \$28,555.00.¹⁰

1851 Rev. Henry Harbaugh, Pastor of the First Reformed Church, wrote, "About a year ago the glass chandelier fell behind the times through the introduction of gas."¹¹

The Centennial Year of the First Reformed Church's "new auditorium" was celebrated in 1954. A feature was the early morning Christmas service when the gas-lighted Christmas Star of Bethlehem was lit for the hundredth time. In 1953 the star had to be adapted to natural gas by slanting it to prevent heat from the lower ports from blowing out the flame above. United Gas Improvement Co. repairmen found it in good shape after the regular reaming of the ports which is done regularly every three or four years.¹²

From 1851 to 1861 the Lancaster Gas Company created several new business houses such as Getz and Harburger, W. King Street, who sold and installed gas fittings for home, churches or factories.¹³

1852 Coal replaced rosin in the making of illuminating gas in Lancaster. Alcohol or other liquids, sometimes raw whiskey, were used in "wet meters" to keep them from freezing.¹⁴

1865 The financial report of the town ending the fiscal year March, 1865, included, "To pay lighting streets in winter and dark nights, \$3100.00."¹⁵

1883 A vote was extended by the directors of the Lancaster Gas, Light and Fuel Co. to place a new lamp in front of the First Reformed Church free of charge.¹⁶

1885 Baron Carl Auer von Welsbach brought out his popular gas mantel in 1885 and gaslight took on a new flourish. This was in spite of the Franklin Institute's First International Electric Exhibition in Philadelphia the year before.¹⁷

1886 The Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Lancaster was formed.¹⁸

1891 Two electric light plants and a gas plant supplied power and light for the city in the next two years. Gas was supplied by the Lancaster Gas, Light and Fuel Co. at the rate of \$1.60 per 1000 feet. The Edison Electric Illuminating Co. of Lancaster, which commenced operations in 1886 was being liberally patronized. Several hundred arc lights illuminated the streets.¹⁹ Mrs. Blanche Snavely recalls an arc light used at the crossing in front of her home at the corner of N. Water and W. Chestnut Streets in the 1880's.

1895 The Lancaster Gas Light and Fuel Company purchased the Edison Electric Illuminating Company.²⁰

1901 In addition to the Conestoga Traction Company, there was incorporated the Lancaster County Railway and Light Company, with a capital of \$2,000,000, for the purpose of constructing and operating electric light, gas and power plants and electric railways. Among the incorporators were William W. Griest of Lancaster and William S. Given of Columbia.²¹

REFERENCE NOTES

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- ⁶ *Ibid.* p. 217
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- ¹⁴ Barnes
- ¹⁵ Riddle, p. 274
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