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Electricity Connects us to our History!

Last month I told you a tidbit about Steve Powell. As mentioned, I find writing about people I knew, or who still have close family nearby very difficult. But there is a reward for taking the chance and last months short venture into Steve's background returned much to me. I received a note from his granddaughter Lesley who told me my article has sparked her family into creating an album of Steve and his many projects. This is what I write for! Not only to tell you the story, but also to encourage you to get involved and find out more about the people I write about. Lesley has accepted my invitation to join us at the Port Maitland, Festival of History this July where she and a number of her cousins will have a table displaying information and photos related to their grandpa. If you have any photos or stories to share about Steve, please contact Lesley at 905 701-0379 or via email at powersb3@yahoo.com.

My sister Margo also commented she liked my article about Steve, and she felt it was time I began writing a bit more about people she could remember instead of for the old-fogies! *She did not really say that!* So, once again I will not follow my big sisters advice! This month I wish to tell you about electricity. If you follow my article you know I get much of my information from old newspapers and old-timers memories. Here are a few facts, I have discovered about electricity over the last one hundred and twenty years.

In 1886, with the installation of a new electric light sitting atop a sixty foot pole, (This seems a bit high to me.) on the south side of the canal near the new swing bridge, and three more soon to be erected, one near the old swing bridge, one midway on the embankment, and another at the waste-weirs near the Village of Byng, Dunnville claimed it was the best lit town in all of Ontario. For many years the Dunnville swing bridge has been considered a veritable "Man-trap" on very dark nights and the lives of several people have been placed in great jeopardy by walking off the bridge or embankment into the canal between the two locks. (I am not aware of two locks in Dunnville. Can anyone help me out on this?) It seems once technology bit, it bit hard, as only a few months later there was a petition from Robert Bennett, a local contractor who built St. Michael's church, and Wm. Bullock along with thirty others, requesting council erect an electric light at the Catholic church. The reply from the Electric Light Company was to give notice they would charge 16 $\frac{2}{3}$ cents per night, commencing on November 20th.

It may seem odd today, but even electric lights on a ship made the news. An excursion from Port Maitland to Dunkirk by the Live Oak Hose Company took place on Tuesday, August 28, 1888 aboard the steamer *Mascotte* which normally plied between Buffalo and Fort Erie Grove. The *Mascotte* was a new and handsome boat, built in 1885, with an iron hull and double screws. It was completely out-fitted as a passenger boat and had fifty electric lights. She was allowed to carry 500 passengers. Tickets to Dunkirk and return cost \$1.00.

Things have not changed much since 1896 when, a horse belonging to my 1st cousin three times removed, Alonzo E. Bessey, of Dunn, started from in front of Mr. M. J. Cleary's store, and ran down Lock St. to Chestnut, thence up Broad Street to Michener's corner, where the animal was stopped. The rig, a top buggy to which the horse was attached struck an electric light pole on Broad Street, and broke the shafts and badly damaged one of the

wheels. The horse was not injured. Cousin Alonzo, was not even on the rig for the ride!

In 1898, I found an advertisement for an excursion which read *The Puritan* is the finest excursion steamer on Lake Erie - 300 feet long, lighted throughout by electricity, has three decks, ten water tight bulkheads, and a lake carrying capacity of 1,300 passengers. This is the first boat excursion from Dunnville in eight or nine years. I believe the above sentence is fairly correct. My research indicates it may have been in September 1892 when the last steamer, the *Pilgrim* sailed from Buffalo at 9 a.m and arrived in Dunnville at 5 p.m. This trip cost 50¢.

There was sail power, horse power, steam, oil, and gas powered boats in the early 1900's, but did you know there was also electric powered boats. The superintendent of the Welland Canal, Mr. Weller, used the electric yacht *General* in 1903 to make his inspections of the Feeder Canal. In 1904, a number of Buffalo yachts, and launches visited Port Maitland. Eight were electric powered. One of these boats, the *Anemone*, belonged to a Mr. Millar who spent the week at Port Maitland. Four of the Buffalo boats tied up above the dam at Dunnville. From 1905, I find information which I believe is only partly correct. My source tells me the Canal from Port Maitland to Port Dalhousie was lighted and the locks operated by electricity. I am certain the lock at Port Maitland should not have been included among the electrically operated locks.

By 1906, considerable money, political capital, and newsprint were consumed promoting the Dunnville, Wellandport and Beamsville Electric Railway. This is a long story by itself and should be dealt with on its own. To make a very long story short, it never really got off the ground as planned.

Continuing to search for the word electric I discovered the inner range light on the west pier at Port Maitland was erected in September 1920. Almost eighty years to the day, in 2000, it was removed. The top of it may be found at Bill Moyer's home in Port Maitland.

Electricity took its time coming to Byng and Port Maitland. It did not come easy! Only after the considerable efforts of Mr. W. R. Newman owner of Newman's shoe store, did the Electric Commission permit the erection of poles in Dunn Township with electricity to follow by the fall of 1930.

If Fuzzy (Lorne) Featherstone or Steve Powell were here to tell the story, they would likely tell you that on a nice spring day in 1954, they both discovered more respect for electricity. Captain Featherstone and his partner Steve were escorting a number of pleasure fishermen for a day on the river when the aerial of the *Dollar Boat* struck an overhead wire charged with 4,160 volts near Grigg's Mill. Sparks flew, fuses burst, power onboard died, and even an angler had holes pitted in his glasses. Fortunately no one was hurt.

I could tell you more, but I am plum out of room!

If you have items, you wish to have written about or pictures you would be willing to lend me, please drop me a note. Let me know how you feel about these articles. William (Bill) Arthur Warnick 180 Rosslyn Ave. South HAMILTON, ON L8M 3J5 e-mail wwarnick@cogeco.ca Phone 905 531-4350.