

Prentice's Gas and Electric Company

by Lynne Belluscio

Last week's article, the topic was natural gas. LeRoy was connected to the natural gas wells in Pavilion in 1907, but LeRoy had "manufactured gas" before that.

"Manufactured gas" was available in Philadelphia as early as 1796. Baltimore provided manufactured gas to residences, street lights, and businesses in 1816. This gas was extracted from coal and was known as coal gas.

Many small communities had gas companies. I am still not sure exactly when LeRoy was first supplied with gas, but I'm still looking. (I'm hampered with the lack of a bulb for the microfilm reader. Elizabeth Bolton, who works in the Gallery, has been reading through the pages of the *LeRoy Gazette* gathering information. It's slow going!)

Discoveries in the process of manufacturing gas, resulted in a process that manufactured gas from water. Known as "water gas", it produced heat as it burned, but it did not burn with a flame that produced enough illumination. Then in 1877, T.S.C. Lowe discovered the "carbureted water gas process" which made gas from water but it could be "enriched" or carbureted with light oils, which when burned, produced a bright light.

We have two gas chandeliers in LeRoy House. Both have been electrified. In the back parlor is a gas chandelier that came from Ingham University. A little research into the Ingham records might prove when Ingham used gas. Another gas chandelier hangs in the front parlor, from a house on Church Street. Most of the fireplaces in LeRoy House are also plumbed for gas.

In the May 9, 1894 issue of the *LeRoy Gazette*, on the front page, was an explanation of the carbureted gas process at Prentice's Mill, north of town along the Oatka Creek: "gas making by the old system was continuous - - night and day, with constant attention. (This implies that there was a coal gas plant in LeRoy) Now, enough for a whole day is made in 25 minutes, and the plant is idle for nearly 24 hours, thus greatly lessening the cost all around.

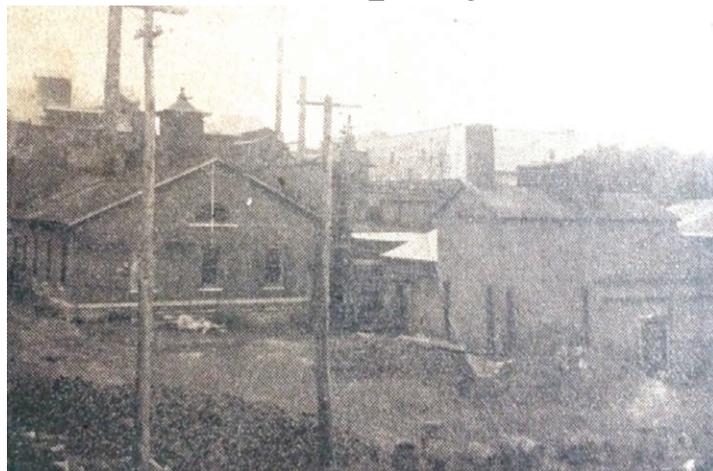
A blast of steam was forced up through the coke, and water gas plain and simple was the result. Water gas alone burns with a blue flame and with no illuminating power. Then a small quantity of petroleum was admitted through another pipe, and this added the illuminating property of the gas. The gas is then passed through a scrubber which separated the impurities. The gas was then piped into a cylinder tank filled with water that prevents the escape of the gas." This tank held the gas until it was needed.

The article continues: "Technically speaking, the new process consists of the destructive distillation of water, accomplished by passing steam through incandescent fuel, thereby separating the hydrogen from oxygen. The gas is afterwards carbureted up to the desired candlepower by the introduction of oil or other like hydrocarbons. The apparatus is the invention of James Gray, a well known engineer from Pittsburgh. . ."

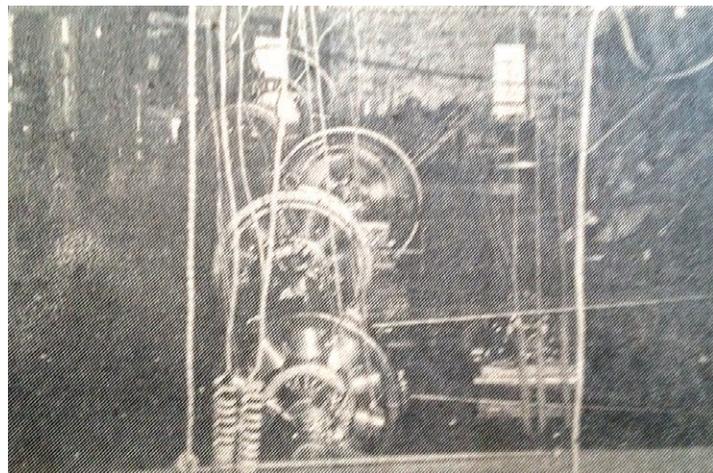
At the same time, Prentice was producing gas, he was also producing electricity. Just a few months before the announcement of his new gas facility, he announced his new electric facility. Prentice had purchased the site of the old Jones paper mill (now the site of the sewage treatment plant) and was retrofitting the mill for the production and transmission of electricity. He widened the old millrace and installed McCormick 21 inch cylinder gate turbines. It is clearly stated that "It will be of the alternating variety." (see note below)

Prentice installed a coal fired 150 horse power boiler and 150 horse power engine to supplement the water supply when necessary. Prentice's electric station was in service by June 13, 1894. A short article mentions that "the light furnished is of great brilliance - - it is now in use in Mr. Prentice's residence (on Church St.) his mill and office, the salt works refinery and N.B. Keeney and Son's warehouse. The arc light in Taft's store will be in use this evening.

"The following week another



Gas House, Station No. 2 (1905) - Property of LeRoy Hydraulic Electric Gas Company.



(1905) Interior view of the Electric Light Plant No. 1.

article mentioned that electricity would be furnished all night ... 'thus providing against the use of the dangerous kerosene lamp or any other light where flame is produced or where matches are used."

For many years, people could choose electricity or gas. Periodically, the Village would use electric street lights and then it would go back to gas. A wonderful story was told by Andrew Weinman, who as a boy, had the job of lighting and extinguishing the gas lamps in the Village. He was paid \$20 a month.

In 1886, the Village voted to replace the gas lights with electric lights. "I for one wasn't sorry about the change because lighting and extinguishing the gas lights was a strenuous job. We had to start lighting just before dark and extinguished them between 12 and 1 am. We had the Village divided into four routes. My route started at the Village Hall on Bank Street, up Myrtle Street to Bissell's Grove and down Gilbert and West Main and Main Street to

Mill Street. I often wonder how many lads in these days would want to make two such trips every night, winter and summer for \$5 a week. Many times we had to wade through snow more than knee deep . . ."

*The notice about Prentice's electric facility which provided "alternating" current is extremely interesting, since it was only a few years before, that equipment for alternating current was developed. Thomas Edison believed that direct current was the only solution for transmitting electricity. The problem was, that direct current could not be transmitted any further than two miles at the most. Nicola Tesla knew that alternating current was the only way to transmit electricity.

The *LeRoy Gazette* published a long article about Tesla's work in April 1893 "Light Minus Heat - the Discoveries Nikola Tesla is Giving the World." Nicola's patents would be bought by George Westinghouse and would be implemented in the massive power plants at Niagara Falls in 1895.