

# Natural Gas

by Lynne Belluscio

I was hoping to do an article about early electricity in LeRoy, but ironically the electricity failed me and the electric bulb on the microfilm reader blew on Friday, so I haven't been able to get to the files that I need. In the meantime, I thought I'd put together some information about gas in LeRoy and I have to admit that I don't fully understand what exactly was happening. So some of that story will have to wait – until the new microfilm bulb arrives. But I can trace the use of “natural gas” in LeRoy to the Pavilion Natural Gas Company.

By definition, natural gas is acquired by drilling a well and capturing the gas and sending it through pipes. (In contrast to manufactured gas, which can be made by burning coal, which I think was made at the LeRoy Hydraulic Electric Gas Company on Mill Street).

It was a surprise to me to learn that the first natural gas well specifically drilled to produce natural gas was in Fredonia, New York in 1821. William Hart dug a well on the banks of the Canadaway Creek that was 27 feet deep. By 1825, he was able to provide natural gas to two stores, two shops and a gristmill in Fredonia by using hollowed out logs sealed with tar and rags. The first American natural gas company was formed in 1858 by the Fredonia Gas Light Company.

On July 17, 1905, work was begun on a natural gas well in nearby Pavilion. On August 30, gas was struck at a depth of 1,762 feet on land owned by J.Q.D. Page. The well produced 85,000 cubic feet per day. Shortly after, eight more wells were drilled. One was drilled on Mr. Page's land, two on the farm of Jasper Starr, and one each on land of Percy Hooker, George Carr, Rufus Hutchineso, B.F. Trescott and Charles Cain.

The Starr well No. 2 was the largest producing well in New York State with 4,100,000 cubic feet per day. The total production of the nine wells was over 11 million cubic feet in twenty four hours. The gas field was controlled by the Pavilion Natural



Gas Co. and consisted of about 12,000 acres of land, six miles in length and three miles wide along the Oatka Creek. A six-inch pipe was laid from Pavilion to LeRoy, a distance of seven miles, to provide natural gas to LeRoy.

In our files are several booklets published by the Pavilion Natural Gas Company, outlining the progress of the new company. Arthur H. Tryon, who owned a hardware store in LeRoy advertised his classic gas heaters and cook stoves: “Gas heating is truly economical with this wonderful heater.” F.L.B. Taft mentioned that “In selecting our gas ranges, heaters and fixtures we have borne this in mind the Best is None too Good.” Thomas Greenham advertised Detroit Jewel Gas Stoves and ranges and Stevens & Butler mentioned in their ad that they were “The Natural Gas Men - - Everything for Natural Gas.” Their stoves were the Douglas and Good Luck Gas Stoves and Ranges.

The Pavilion Gas bulletin states that the first natural gas to be burned in LeRoy was “lighted in the Eagle Hotel, January 15, 1907, directly after the completion of the main line”. In less than a year, there were 445 meters installed in business places and residences throughout LeRoy. But apparently there were difficulties. Ten years later, an article in the

January 17, *Gazette*, indicates that there was a gas shortage and it wasn't the first time. “Customers of the Pavilion Natural Gas Company in LeRoy experienced the greatest inconvenience and most discomfort from a shortage of gas Monday - - - ” For some people it meant no heat or light. Others who relied on gas ranges, had cold meals. The situation was so bad, that some families had to move in with neighbors who still used coal for heating and cooking. Kerosene lamps and candles provided light.

The newspaper noted that one man in town didn't have time to get cold - - that was Mayor Daniel O'Shea, whose telephone rang off the wall with disgruntled LeRoyans who were faced with frigid temperatures and no gas. The language of the time made the *Gazette* article fun to read: “Of course the mayor was powerless to do anything to relieve the situation, but somehow people seemed to take of lot of comfort of this nature. It was some consolation to him to know that the same string of complaints embellished with little words that are naughty but sometimes very expressive, were being buzzed over the wires to the gas company office. The mayor and the gas officials would both have voted unanimously for the absolute abandonment of all telephone

systems everywhere, and particularly in LeRoy before noon.”

Apparently the Pavilion wells could not keep up with the demand, and a new well was being drilled, but progress had been stopped when the drill was lost in the well. At what point, the gas service was improved is not known, but the Pavilion Gas Company continued to serve the LeRoy community until 1980, when Rochester Gas and Electric proposed a merger. Pavilion Gas was serving most of LeRoy, Pavilion, Covington, Perry, Warsaw, Leicester, York and Avon and a small section of Geneseo.

The Valley Gas Company was serving Stafford, Byron and part of Pavilion. The acquisition had to be approved by the New York State Public Service Commission, but when folks discovered that their rates would go up, they appealed to the Town of LeRoy to acquire the Pavilion Gas service. Lengthy discussions finally resulted in the decision that it was not possible for LeRoy to take over the Pavilion Gas Company and it was bought by RG&E and Pavilion Natural Gas Company ceased to exist.

