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Early Power in Gilboa and Middleburgh

Thelma Serrie

In thinking about power and light early in my life, I was reminded of two stories my mother told about life in Middleburgh and Gilboa during the first quarter of the twentieth century.

The first dealt with Middleburgh. Like Gilboa, the center of Middleburgh had a community electrical system to serve the village. However, in the 1900–1920 period, there were few appliances that needed electric power—the major use of electricity was for the new electric lightbulbs. Therefore, the generator was only used from dusk to about 10 p.m., at which time the electricity was cut off.

While the sidewalks weren't rolled up at curfew, they certainly were not illuminated throughout the night by the electric bulbs of that time.

The second concerned lighting on area farms: Many houses at that time were outfitted with gaslights, and the fuel was acetylene gas supplied by a carbide gas generator placed in the basement, a separate outbuilding, or a hole in the ground near the house (the location was based on the farmer's thoughts on the safety of gas lights).

The generator had two tanks: a water tank on top with a stopcock that controlled the dripping of water onto a block of calcium chloride in the lower, airtight tank. The resulting chemical reaction created a relatively large amount of acetylene gas that escaped through the pipe network to the various gas jets of lights throughout the house. At that time, there was also a small version of the carbide gas generator used to power headlights on early Model T Fords.

My grandfather, Andrew Moore, was a very well respected figure in the area and he was also very aware of the benefits of gas lights and energy. In our house, we used the gas not only for lighting, but we also used gas for ironing clothes and cooking food. Because of this commitment to his product, the salesman for the generator company, Mr. Ogsbury, had my grandfather take him to see the area farmers. Gramp got \$10 for each sale, a princely price at that time.

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