

The Street Lamps of St. Charles

By Bill Popp

In early 1867 two salesmen came to St. Charles to demonstrate an "Illuminator" that could help make the city's streets safer and more secure. Representing Campbell & Crihfield of Lincoln, Illinois, Lee & Randall set up a street lamp fueled by coal oil that created great interest on the part of the citizenry.¹² City Council minutes³ of April 3, 1867 report the following:

A petition signed by W. H. Maertens, H. Kemper, J. C. Bright and (112) one hundred and twelve others was presented; calling the attention of the Hon. Board to the "Street Lamps" introduced and on exhibition in our Town, by the Agent of Messrs. Campbell & Crihfield of Lincoln County Ills. Patentees of the So-Called "Illuminator" and praying the Hon. Council to make some appropriation for procuring Lamps to light up Main Street and other principal streets of the City.

The above petition, having been received, and after due consideration and examination of the Subject by the Council, and of the proposition made by the Agent of the Said "Illuminator" to sell to the City, the County Patent right, for the sum of two hundred and fifty dollars, with the Street Lamps at ten 50/100 dollars per piece: the following resolution was adopted.

Resolved: That the City Marshal be and is hereby instructed to Solicit Subscriptions among the Citizens of St. Charles City for the purpose of aiding the City in purchasing Street Lamps "Such as are at present on exhibition in St. Charles, in order to light up the most important Streets of the City, such as, Main, Second, Clay and Jefferson Streets, and

also for purchasing the Patent right for the County of St. Charles.

The history of street lamps goes back to antiquity. But their popularity was stymied by the lack of a cheap and reliable fuel source. In 1816, Baltimore was the first American city to employ street lamps, using the new gas that was manufactured from coal. As gas plants, built mainly by small groups of local entrepreneurs, were installed in other cities, street lamps proliferated.⁴

For those cities too small to justify manufacturing gas and installing pipes to distribute it, the invention of coal oil and kerosene prior to the Civil War provided a reasonably safe, reliable fuel alternative.⁵ Coal oil could be shipped to St. Charles by rail, and it wasn't long until most homes, businesses and farms had one or more of the new-fangled lamps lighting the dim interiors of their parlors and barns.

By April 5, 1867, the City Marshal had received subscriptions for street lights in the amount of four hundred and thirteen dollars, and asked that further time be granted to complete the subscription list.

At the City Council meeting of May 7, 1867, Mayor Charles Hug presented the following report:

Gent: I hereby report that I have received of H. G. C. Dammer, former Deputy Marshal, appointed to solicit [sic] private subscriptions from the citizens of St. Charles City, for the purchasing of Street Lamps including the Patent right, the sum of five hundred and fifteen 50/100 dollars; that, thirty three 50/100 dollars is still in the hands of the said Dammer and that Twelve Dollars of the subscription has not been collected from the following: viz; C. K. Elmendorf \$5.00, F. Schaffer \$5.00, and W. J. Charlesworth \$2.00, which would have made a total subscription of five hundred and sixty one dollars; out of the amount I have received, I paid to Lee and Randall Five Hundred Dollars on the 17th of April last as part

payment on the said Lamps & patent right, and Fifteen 50/100 to the Merchants Union Express for Freight on the said Lamps. I also report that a warrant of one hundred and twenty one 75/100 dollars was issued as per order of the council of April 22nd to pay the balance due to said Lee \$n Randall on the said lamps ant patent right; making a total amt. paid for Thirty Five (35) Street Lamps \$ patent (patent) right including freight thereon, of Six Hundred and Thirty Seven 25/100 dollars.

Respectfully Submitted – Chas. Hug (City Mayor)

City Council minutes record bills rendered for coal oil and other supplies needed to maintain the lamps over the next months. For example, Mayor Hug presented a bill for “ Coal Oil furnished for Street Lamps - 6 gallons at 60 cents (\$3.60) and 16 gallons at 65 cents (\$10.40). Lamp wick 75 cents, 1 pr. Scissors for trimming lamps 60 cents.”

At the City Council meeting of Dec. 4, 1867, an account of Henry Widey was presented for “coal oil furnished for street lamps from Sept. 30 to Nov. 26 inclusive 45 ½ gallons at 70 cents. 31.85, To matches 75 cts. Total Thirty two 60/100 dollars.”

Two night policemen were paid a differential of 50 cents per night to “attending to street lamps”. This raised their pay from \$1.50/night to \$2.00/night.

By 1871, the City of St. Charles had grown to the point that investors formed a gas company. Synthetic gas was being manufactured in gas works built primarily in New York City, and shipped by rail or boat to cities elsewhere in the country. These gas works included coal bins, retorts in which coal was heated to about 2300 degrees fahrenheit in air tight conditions, and a system of pipes carrying the resulting gases through an exhauster (pump) and scrubbers that removed sulphur and purified the gas. The gas could then be distributed through pipes to individual businesses and residences and used to heat and and light those buildings. The

manufacture of coal gas polluted the air, the nearby land, and rivers and streams that carried off the waste products.

The St. Charles Gas and Coal Company was organized February 20, 1871 with \$100,000 capital furnished equally by Sylvester Watts, Charlie Thaw, Theodore Bruere, James Britton and John C. Orrick.⁶ Just 5 weeks later Watts⁷ made a proposal to the City Council to provide gas street lamps. Since the existing coal oil lamps were only 4 years old, Watts suggested that these lamps could be altered slightly to burn gas. Council minutes of April 1, 1871 state:

A proposition of Sylvester Watts, Supt. Of Gas Works was presented to the Council proposing to put up and furnish the City with Lamp posts with connecting pipes, cocks, and burners, lamp frames and glasses all complete and ready for burning Gas for the sum of \$37.00 dollars each (St. Louis price), Or put up posts connecting pipes and cocks and burners without lamp, frames and glasses for the sum of \$32.00 dollars each.. He further stated that the lamps now used on the streets could be used with a slight alteration. On motion of Zeisler⁸ the above proposition of Sylvester Watts was laid on the table.

A month later the City Council began planning in earnest for gas street lamps. Selected items of business from City Council minutes follow:

May 1st, 1871 - On motion of Mr.Heye that the Mayor appoint a Committee of three members of the council to ascertain the cost of Lamp Posts and fixtures for street lamps and the probable cost for lighting up the city with Gas was carried; whereupon the following Gentlemen were appointed to wit: Mssrs. Heye, Fetch and Bloebaum.

July 1st, 1871 – The special committee appointed for the purpose to ascertain the probable cost for Lamp Posts, Pipes & Burners, for burning Gas, and also the cost of Gas,

if used by the City for Street lamps; reported that Mr. Watts Superintendent of Gas Works, offers to furnish Iron lamp posts, pipes and burners, and put them up in burning order ready for use, (the City furnishing the lanterns) for Thirty (\$30.00) dollars each, new lanterns he will furnish for Five (\$5.) dollars each, and that the Gas Company will furnish the Gas for Four (\$4.) dollars a thousand cubic feet, the probable cost for Gas at the calculation of 2000 dark hours in the year, will be about \$32.00 dollars for each lamp.

Aug. 5, 1871 – Bids were opened for the furnishing of Fifty Iron lamp posts, together with service pipe, cock and burners, all complete ready for use (lamp frame excepted).

August 23rd, 1871 – On motion of Mr. Zeisler, the regular order of business was suspended. The Mayor stated that he convened the council for the purpose of taking action in regard to changing or altering the old lamp frames to suit the new Iron posts, and to have as many more new ones made, as would be necessary. Whereupon, on motion of Mr. Zeisler, the committee on Gas was authorized to receive bids for the above, and to let the contract to the lowest bidder.

Sept. 16, 1871 - On motion of Mr. Linnemann, the Engineer was ordered to notify Mr. A. J. Kershaw to place the new Iron street lamps closer to the curbing as required by the City Ordinance, and to place them all at a equal height from the ground or sidewalk. On motion of Mr. Meyer, the committee on Gas was instructed to see that all the Lamp frames be placed in their right position.

On motion of Mr. Linnemann, the committee on Gas was authorized to procure two suitable ladders, for lighting the street lamps.

Nov. 4, 1871 – accounts were allowed and warrants ordered – to Ernst Stolgtze, 2 step ladders for street lamps

& 620 pegs. A. J. Kershaw, 51 lamp posts, service pipes, cocks & burners & cross trees.

Dec. 9 – On motion of Mr. Zeisler, the committee on Gas was ordered to draw up an ordinance regulating the burning of Gas in the Street lamps of the City

Dec. 13 - Mr. Zeisler moved that the engineer have five complete street lamps erected for burning Gas, on the following named streets, and at the following designated places: One in the center of block on the South side of Clay street, between 6th and 7th streets. One on the North West corner of Clay and 7th streets, one in the centre of block on the East side of Main street between Pike and Perry streets, one on the North West corner of Perry and Main Streets, and one in the centre of block, on the East side of Main street, between Perry and Water streets. Whereupon, an amendment was offered by Mr. Fitch, to add one to be placed in the centre of block on the West side of Main street, between Clark and Lewis streets; The above to be purchased from the parties that furnished posts and lanterns before; provided that they can be erected and furnished for the same price, which amendment was accepted; Whereupon, a vote was taken and carried.

February 10, 1872 - The Marshal reported that Martin Hennemeyer's⁹ team while running up Clay Street, had broken off a lamp post and demolished the lamp frame, the said lamp being stationed at the corner of 3rd & Clay Streets, and that a new post & frame would be necessary.

Mr. Hennemeyer verbally state, that the running away of his team was not caused by his negligence. Whereupon, on motion to refer the matter to the Committee on Gas; a vote was taken and decided in the negative. Whereupon, it was moved that the Marshal have a new lamp post put up, & the

frame repaired, all at the expense of said Hennemeyer, was carried.

March 18, 1872 - -The Marshal reported to the council that the county court proposes and agrees to have two (2) Gas Lamps and posts put up in front of the Court House, to be used in necessary occasions only; provided that the city would then pay for the Gas that would be consumed. On motion of Mr. Zeisler the above proposition was accepted.

On April 5, 1872, a warrant was ordered for payment to S. Watts in the amount of \$189.77 for lamposts and labor on gas lamps. On May 4th, 1872, St. Chas Gas Light & Coal for Gas consumed in the street lamps in Apr. 123.40. Two policemen were paid \$7 a month extra of attending to street lamps.

From Annual Statement of Receipts and Expenditures of the City of St. Charles for the corporate year 1871, ending April 5, 1872 -

Item - street lamps (Lights & Posts) - \$1435.05

Item - Gas consumed in street lamps - \$535.04

By 1885, the gas works were being run by superintendent Linneus C. Jennings¹⁰ and two firemen, and there were 135 private consumers and 59 street lamps. \$55,000 of the capital raised had been expended on the works and distribution system.¹¹

Today, natural gas street lamps burn twenty-four hours per day along the historic district of South Main and Boone's Lick Road. They serve as a reminder of life in the City more than a century ago. But few know about the coal oil lamps that once lit these same streets.