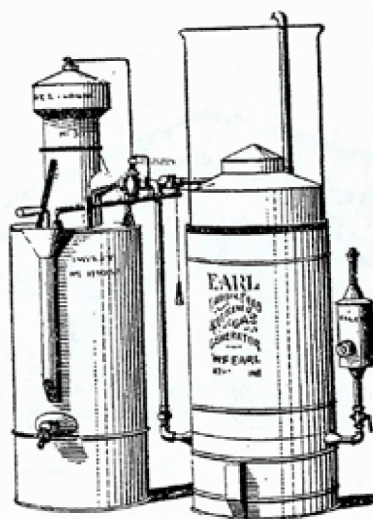




THE EARL ACETYLENE GENERATOR



W. F Earl 1 – Foss Earl and his wife “Frankie” as they appeared in their wedding photo in 1888.

W. F. Earl 2 – A drawing of one of the Earl generators.

FOSS EARL, INVENTOR & EARLY LIGHTING IN ATHENS

By Sally Smid

As we consider the 20th anniversary of the Ice Storm and experience numerous Hydro outages, it is interesting to consider that electrical power was not always available. In earlier days there were alternate means of lighting, including candles, oil lanterns and more. In the 1800's you had to take along a lantern if you went outside after dark, until local fire regulations forbid it. It was recorded that in 1892, one of the many jobs of the Athens town constable was to light the street lamps and put them out. It was also recorded that in 1903, the first gas street light was placed at the corner of Elgin and Central Streets by A. E. Donovan who lived across the road at 10 Elgin. It was a 70-candle power gas burner and nearby residents helped to fund it. In 1921 the Athens Women's Institute purchased 25 coal oil lamps to light the street corners. Later they were replaced with gas lights. Residents living nearest to the lighted corners would light the lamps each night.

Athens can also lay claim to the fact that the village had a most unique form of lighting in its earlier years. A local man who is often overlooked for his ingenious inventions in that regard is W. Foss Earl (1866-1953). He was listed as a trustee of the Athens Model School and also operated a construction business. He began as a tinsmith, which was most useful in his varying enterprises. Earl was most noted for his Acetylene Gas Lighting business. His invention provided a unique form of lighting in the early 1900's.

Acetylene was produced by mixing calcium carbide with water. He manufactured Acetylene generators which were his patented invention. These lights had a soft glow that was more brilliant than the coal oil lamps. His lighting was used in the Town Hall, most businesses, hotels, several local churches, homes, and barns. The Earl generators were advertised as economical, automatic, easy to clean and were fueled with carbide. They

were also promoted as being Canadian made, compact, safe, clean and odourless. They were reported to be “fully approved by the Canadian Board of Fire Underwriters.” Many letters were written by satisfied customers who were very happy with their Earl purchases.

In 1917 his warehouse and lighting plant, which was part of his construction company on Main Street, were destroyed by fire as were the neighbouring telephone exchange and shoe store. Lighting and heating at that time were not quite as fire safe and the local fire department was far less efficient and equipped.

Earl's daughter Marjorie, who was a noted teacher and librarian, donated several items for a display, which is now in the Athens Museum. It includes Earl's “wedding frock” and “the wedding nightgown” of his bride Frances Judson, as well as photos and a booklet which describes his inventions.

Earl's gas lights were replaced by electric lights in 1928 when lighting was controlled by the Athens Hydro Commission. The night that the new lights shone for the first time, Reeve M. B. Holmes referred to Athens Main Street as “The Great White Way”. In 1982, Ontario Hydro took over and sodium, amber lights appeared on the street.

Lighting has come a long way since the days of the oil lantern, but it is interesting to look back and discover the progress made and also give tribute to an ingenious local man who was such an incredible inventor and businessman.

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