

BLOOMSBURG'S STEAM PLANT

An addition to our town's history in the recently published Bloomsburg Bicentennial Book that concerns the early days and uniqueness of the town was the creation and usage for some fifty or more years of a Town Heating Plant which according to Beers "provided heat for many of the public buildings, business houses and residences of Bloomsburg. This comparatively modern method of heating was introduced in the town as early as 1886 by the incorporation of the Bloomsburg Steam and Electric Light Company. In connection with their electric light plant they intended to use the waste steam for several purposes, but the heating department was developed first. Pipes were laid to the homes and stores and steam at a good pressure was supplied even in the coldest weather."

This service was available to what was at that time most of the town, extending from Sixth Street where the boiler plant was located, west to Jefferson, north to First, east on First to Iron and back to Sixth, with lines running north and south on Market and Center and east and west on Main, Third, Fourth and Fifth. Hook-ups were optional but widely used because of the convenience. Large pipes were laid under the street from the plant where boilers kept a constant flow of steam under pressure. In the very early days these iron pipes were surrounded by logs to keep them from freezing in winter. Smaller pipes led from the "mains" to individual buildings, which included homes, churches, and the court house the town hall, all the banks, the post office, the Elks Club, the Moose Club, the Magee Hotel, the library, and most of the merchants on Main Street. Numerous manholes were installed over the pipes for emergency repairs for which the owners of the plant were responsible. The owner of the building was then obligated to purchase the number of radiators deemed necessary to heat the house or business and the Steam Company hooked them to the source. Each radiator was filled with water, heated by the steam and controlled by its own valve which could be turned on or off, but before the invention of thermostats the amount of heat had to be manually regulated. The outstanding features of this system were the cleanliness and convenience of having heat available day and night with no soot, coal dirt or smoke, and nobody had to bank or stoke the fires as they had done with coal furnaces.

(Later, with the installation of thermostats, the water from the radiator drained off and went through a meter, similar to those used by the present Water Co., and the user was billed by the amount of water used, which then returned to the sewer.)

In August of 1908 the Public Steam and Heating Plant went into receivership according to a 1910 clipping by Historian John Freeze, and at that time the sole surviving trustee for bondholders of the mortgage agreed that the real estate should be sold free of any lien. Exceptions were made by Paul E. Wirt, C. M. Crevling and William Masters, but Judge Charles Evans ruled in favor of the sale.

So in September that year the steam plant was purchased by J. T. Tracy and A. W. Sharpless, who had it incorporated on March 26, 1909, and soon made it an important business investment. After the death of Tracy, for several years the sole owner was Mr.

Sharpless. In the beginning the company had paid for freshly mined coal to run the plant's steam boilers, but as Sharpless owned a number of coal dredges in operation in the summer, he was assured of an abundant and cheaply obtained supply of fuel that had been washed down from anthracite coal breakers in the Plymouth, Kingston and Nanticoke areas. In order to get out impurities, these breakers would wash the coal and blow the wash water back into the river. This water contained very fine bits of coal, much like sand, and in the spring when melting snow in upper New York State caused the river to swell, this fine coal was washed downstream and settled on the river bottom in the Almedia, Lime Ridge and Espy areas. Heavy barges used suction pumps to lift it on board, then towed it ashore where it was piled in the open and then trucked into Bloomsburg. The same workmen who dredged the river in summer, were then employed to fire the steam boilers during the heating season. The steam was turned on the day after Labor Day and turned off the day after Memorial Day.

We found no specific mention of the plant between 1908 and 1913, but according to the writings of Heister White, his nephew, Richard Boyd White had been working with his father, William L. White, in the Paragon Plaster Company. William White was also co-owner of the White Milling Co. which later burned in a spectacular fire. In 1913 he purchased the Bloomsburg Heating Co. and in 1922 his son Dick White, at the age of 24, became manager and later owner and operator. He enlarged and improved the plant, adding four new stokers, boilers and modern equipment that more than doubled the capacity. White also organized, owned and operated the General Dredging Co. at Espy to furnish coal for the Heating Co. By that time Dick had bought a large brick home on Market Street and had opened a Steam Company office on Main just west of Market where people could pay their heat bills or report any problems. Dick made Ted Ludwig, his daughter Mildred's husband, office manager, and when White decided to retire in 1944, Ted ran the business for another two years.

In 1946 they received an offer to sell the company and the dredging plant to W. Clair Hidlay, a local pharmacist with a drug store at 26 East Main Street. Hidlay had attended Philadelphia College of Pharmacy with a man named Scott Rhea who, with a businessman named Derick, now owned a string of drug stores and agreed to purchase the Hidlay Pharmacy thus the appearance in that year of Rhea and Derrick in Bloomsburg.

At that time Clair Hidlay lived next to the Fair entrance on West Main Street, and thought, as owner, he should live on the steam line, so told White the deal had to include Dick's Market Street home. (Hidlay then sold his home to Harry Magee for his newly married daughter Joanne and her husband Miles Katerman.)

The Steam Company and its dredging system became a subsidiary of the Hidlay Oil Co. The system worked well until the early 1960s when Governor George Leader signed into law a bill to clean up Pennsylvania streams, which stopped the coal companies from washing and dumping the coal into the river. The Steam Company was then forced to buy new coal, but as a result of labor problems in the mines, this became too expensive and they switched their boilers to burn heavy fuel oil bought to Bloomsburg by tanker trucks

from Newark or Baltimore. At that time this fuel was relatively cheap, but it was so thick it had to be kept at a warm temperature in order to allow it to flow. The tankers had to be insulated, and after it arrived the oil had to be kept warm in storage by having steam pipes running through them.

The death knell of the Bloomsburg Heating Co. was sounded when the Penna Gas Co. (now PE Energy) came through the area with a large natural gas pipeline in the late 1960s. By that time the price of oil for fuel was so high that the price per pound of steam for the customers to heat their buildings was far too expensive, and as a result many changed to heating with gas or electricity. Somewhere along the line the Heating Co. had become certified as a public utility, so was under the control of the State Public Utility Commission (as were the P.P.L., Water Co., Gas and Phone companies) so in order to go out of business it was necessary to file a petition with the PUC to cease operations. This was granted in 1968, and as with many other early enterprises, it became just another interesting piece of Bloomsburg history.