

"Westminster Gets Electric Lighting"

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By Jay A. Graybeal

The 1895 election in Westminster centered on the issue of electric lighting for the city. The "electric arc light" faction won out over the "gas light" supporters and the city was soon illuminated by electricity. J. Leland Jordan wrote about the impact of the new lighting in his September 18, 1942 column in this newspaper:

"In our column Last week we mentioned the fact that through a vote of the citizenry, the use of street lighting by electric arc lamps was preferred. That is, the overwhelming majority of the 'Electric' ticket over the 'Gas' Ticket brought electric lights to our streets. To follow the press and certain actions on the part of our city fathers, it would indicate that Westminster took on new life immediately. There seemed to be a bit of pride popping up here and there, and it was felt that the deplorable condition of our streets and pavements, showed up almost as bad under the new 'arcs' as they did by day. There was actually a general cleaning up all over town.

From the time of the third incorporation of Westminster in 1838, and in up through the years to the turn of the century, the corporation authorities passed on occasions, (too numerous to mention here) acts to compel property holders to clean their sidewalks and curbing of grass and weeds and to lay proper pavements and gutters.

Quite frequently in the early years the town authorities found it necessary to employ laborers to mow the grass along Main street and the side streets. A note in the local press as late as 1888, recorded that the town council was having 'superfluous vegetation removed from our thorough fares.' Then too, it was moved occasionally by the Council, 'that debris should be removed from the sidewalks and gutters.' All these acts and notices would indicate that our thoroughfares were in a deplorable condition.

Paving had received its share of attention throughout the years. One of the first acts following the incorporation of 1838 was a paving and grading ordinance. Either good brick or flagging was preferred. On November 11, 1839, flagging was ordered laid from 'sidewalk to sidewalk across alleys.' In 1882 the city ordered 142 property owners in the town 'to pave, grade, repair or replay their brick pavements.'

Evidently these requests on the part of our city fathers received only scant attention, for as late as 1910 similar requests were being made.

Many of our readers will remember these conditions—they will recall cinder walks, board and plank walks and in some places no side walks at all. Most all the curbing was of limestone, but some of the more prominent homes sported brick gutters and there were a few curbs of planking.

As has been said, the town seemed to take on new life after the coming of the arc lamps, and many of these breakneck side walks were relaid and a majority of those who had not walks at all, complied with the town ordinances. Walking actually became safer.

Many of us remember the hours we have spent cleaning grass from our sidewalks and gutters—but can you remember the hundreds of black bugs then buzzed about those arc lamps at night? We took great joy in tramping on them, just to hear them crack."

It is interesting to see how the residents responded to the improved lighting. Some residents fixed their sidewalks, others installed them, and local kids like Jordan found a new way to have fun at the expense of the bug population.

Photo caption: Westminster streets, including this section of E. Main, were lit with electric lights following the 1895 city election. Historical Society of Carroll County collection.