

## **Once Upon A Time .... (Author unknown)**

It is February 4, 1889. 28 years ago, your great grandfather, maybe a distant cousin or an uncle was fighting in the Civil War. Benjamin Harrison had just been elected as President of the United States.

On this cold winter night, shortly after dusk, one of the most important events in the history of North Carolina is about to take place. The City Engineer, Mr. T.L. Steele, has assembled a group of civic leaders just off North Center Street in downtown Statesville.

A switch is pulled and the first electric lights illuminate the tiny downtown area for 2 hours. Town officials probably had no idea that this was to be one of the most significant events in the history of the City. At the time, they only wanted a better alternative to gas street lamps.

This was the beginning of Public Power and today, Statesville is recognized as the first Public Power Community in North Carolina. In order for this event to take place, a bond election authorizing \$8,000 was held to finance this project. The lot on North Center Street was purchased for \$350.00 and the Mr. Steele; the engineer was paid a salary of \$40.00 per month.

Although 1889 is recognized as the official beginning of public power, records from 1872 mention the City's use of kerosene lamps. Electricity was first produced in Statesville using a steam generator powered by wood. It was a small unit and within one month, it was not operating satisfactorily.

By July, 1889, the City was in the full-time business of selling lights and poles throughout the City. A new engineer was hired for \$80.00 per month. Total expenses for the fiscal year of 1889 were \$5,509.89. There were numerous requests for city wide street lighting and by 1891; street lights were placed at the Courthouse on South Center Street.

The first residential streetlight was installed at the corner of Race and Alexander Streets.

In 1891, coal instead of wood was used to generate power.

During the next 15 years, there was not much public development in Statesville and a number of public records were either lost or misplaced.

October, 1900 – The first loco mobile, also known as a horseless carriage, was brought to Statesville and driven by Clarence and Oscar Steele of J.C. Steele & Sons. It was powered by steam, generated by gasoline. It weighed 500 pounds and traveled as fast as 40 miles per hour.

In 1906, the steam plant on North Center Street was enlarged. A report from an electrician, who was employed to review plans and costs for changing from steam to electricity was to have been presented, but no decisions were announced.

A transformer station was considered in 1907, and by 1908, the City began providing power to users outside the city limits on the condition that the customer paid all costs to extend the lines.

Around 1908, the generators were turned off, and the City began purchasing electricity from Southern Power in Charlotte. Southern Power is better known today as Duke Energy.

The first electric sign in downtown Statesville was installed in 1910 at the Polk Gray Drug Company, which is where Holmes Drug used to be on the square. Street lights were installed at the square and at the depot.

A transmission line was built to serve the City Water Plant in 1913. The City's first bill collector was hired in 1915. He was also the only Policeman and Sanitarian.

In 1917 and for the next 60 years or so, the City continued to purchase and resell power to its customers. The eastern side of the City began developing between 1924 and 1926. Traffic signals and additional street lighting were installed and the first deposits were required to guarantee payment of utility bills.

New street lighting was installed in the downtown area in 1928. 12-foot ornamental lamps were placed in each direction from the square on Broad and Center Streets.

Also in 1928, the City was offered two million dollars for its electric distribution system. The vote was 4/1 to deny the sale.

The door on municipal improvement was slammed shut in 1929 as the result of the Great Depression. It was not until 1938, that additional equipment was purchased and repairs were made to the sub-station located on Conner Street.

The coming of the World War II also affected the development of the electric system and in 1943 some additional technical improvements were made. A major rebuilding program was begun in 1952.

In the mid 70's, Duke Power was salvaged from bankruptcy when they began financing their construction program with municipal electric systems. The North Carolina Municipal Power Agency was formed and 19 cities in western North Carolina purchased 75% of the Catawba Nuclear station in South Carolina.

The electric system was almost totally destroyed by Hurricane Hugo in 1989. Ironically, we were planning a celebration of 100 years of service when Hugo came blowing into town.