

By Doug Hylton

The decade following the formation of the City of Ronceverte in 1882 was one of immense growth and progress not just for the town but for the country as well. Following the invention of the electric light by Thomas Edison in 1879, he and his investors established the Edison Electric Light Company in 1880 and started efforts to bring electricity to the rest of the country.

Ronceverte, due to the success of the lumber mill of the Saint Lawrence Boom and Manufacturing Company, had seen the town triple in size from 500 to 1500 citizens by 1890. It was thanks to the progressive investors of the gigantic Saint Lawrence Boom and Manufacturing Company that was to see Ronceverte establish the first electric power plant in the state of West Virginia. During this time, a group of men associated with the Saint Lawrence created the Ronceverte Mining and Manufacturing Company and set about making improvements to the town.

On May 5, 1890, a committee of the Ronceverte Mining and Manufacturing Company consisting of Messrs. Ellery C. Best, Augustus E. White, and Ben Hurxthal presented a proposal to the city council to "contribute five hundred dollars to improve the streets, providing that the corporation would contribute a like amount, said fund to be applied principally on Greenbrier and Rail Road Avenues." With this development, the owners of the mill looked toward modernizing the facility with the use of the new electricity. This required that construction of a power facility to allow for producing electricity for the mill and, with it, for the town. It was the business of the city council to ensure the safety of its citizens and to the town's comforts. Lighting was one part of this endeavor. The city's minutes reflect the council's concern with lighting for the new community. In 1886, the city was selecting a street lamp for the downtown. During the Jan. 4, 1886, meeting the city was considering a lamp from the Pennsylvania Globe Gas Light Company stating that good lamps can be furnished at about \$4.75 each, delivered. A counter proposal from representative J. D. Dame reported that he could furnish lamps like those in Lewisburg at a rate of \$57 for two dozen or \$2.37 ½ each.

On Mar. 1, 1886, the council approved the purchase of 17 street lamps from J. D. Dame at \$2.37 ½ each and 16 posts from Rodes and Company, and ordered the sergeant to erect them as soon as practicable. By May 5, 1886, the street lamp committee reported that 15 of the lamps had been installed. It was also approved that the mayor offer a reward not to exceed \$25 for the apprehension and conviction of the parties breaking street lamps in the town. So, apparently the new lamps were being damaged as quickly as they were being put up. By Feb. 7, 1887, the new street lamp committee was appointed to look over the town and ascertain the best thing to do in regard to street lamps. The sergeant was given the duties of lighting the lamps in addition to his regular duties. On Feb. 21, 1887, the street lamp committee received a communication from the Sun Vapor Light and Stove Company of Canton, OH. The committee recommended that no more lamps be put up until a better lamp is procured, and Mr. Staley, the recorder, was ordered to communicate with the Sun Vapor Light and Stove Company and get their best terms.

On Apr. 4, 1887, the council approved a letter from the Sun Vapor Light and Stove Company accepting a proposition to sell lamps in 6-month time, and by June 6, 1887, the street lamp committee reported that the lamps were ready to be put up. Problems with adequate lighting continued and by Dec. 1, 1890, the street light committee reported that lights were not satisfactory and scarcely any of the lights were in good shape. It was at this meeting that Mr. Kittle, a representative of the Edison Electric Light Company, discussed the purchase for electric lights. On motion of Councilman Phillip S. E. Sixeas, it was ordered that the council accept the proposition to furnish 34 lights for \$600 on condition that a 25 lights power be added for the use of the council, and the mayor was authorized to sign the contract for the same.

It was also during this time that the town continued plans for the construction of the power plant. The city and the Ronceverte Mining and Manufacturing Company worked to settle on the location for the new electric plant. It was in January 1891, Mayor Ephriam L. Kramer ordered that a committee of three to include himself, Fred M. Weber and Robert S. Lovelace be appointed to confer with the Ronceverte Mining and Manufacturing Company in regard to securing a site for the electric plant on the end of Chestnut Street. The next month, the city granted the Ronceverte Mining and Manufacturing Company the privilege of putting up poles in the streets of the town for the use of their electric light plant.

By June, 1891, the city was burning its new electric lights. The city continued to coordinate with the Ronceverte Mining and Manufacturing Company to house the city fire engine at the Ronceverte Electric Light Company on Chestnut Street. On Oct. 27, 1891, The Ronceverte Mining and Manufacturing Company was granted permission to house the Electric Light Company building on Chestnut Street now housed by the plant.

(Photo of the employees of the St. Lawrence Boom and Manufacturing Company's Planing Mill, taken Apr. 1, 1908, which is one of the many images that line the walls of the Ronceverte Museum on Edgar Street in Ronceverte.)

For the next decade the city continued to adjust to the new use of electricity. Service was expanded throughout the community, but the cost continued to rise and the city continued to try to cut the costs of the electricity provided to the town. There were also questions as to the times for night lighting and on Oct. 4, 1897, a special committee was convened to confer with General Thomas Shryock, superintendent of the Saint Lawrence Boom and Manufacturing and President of the Ronceverte Electric Light Company, to demand an all-night service without regard to moon lit nights. Minutes from Apr. 21, 1900, had Fred W. Weber, manager of the Electric Light Company, coming to the council meeting with a demand from citizens for additional lights. Mr. Weber stated that the company did not feel able to carry more lights, but would endeavor to do so if the council required it.

By 1913, with the end of the Saint Lawrence Boom and Manufacturing Company, the Ronceverte Electric Light Company had been merged with the Virginia Western Power Company, which was at this time providing electricity to the new Lewisburg and Ronceverte (L&R) Railroad Company. But bigger and better plans relative to the power plant were in the works. Mr. C. H. Thompson, Chairman of the Citizens Committee, brought a proposal to the city council for the construction of a new power plant in the town. On Mar. 6, 1917, council met to consider granting to the Virginia Western Power Company a 50-year franchise, called for the construction of a steam power plant to cost not less than \$200,000, that the city and its citizens pledged not to extend the corporate limits to include the plant once completed, and that the city will make with the said company a one-year contract for street lighting at \$1.25 per 32.c.p. per month, effective Feb. 1, 1917.

The Virginia Western Power Company built a big steam plant in Ronceverte with two concrete smokestacks. In 1917, construction began on the little stack. The building contractor excavated down to solid rock for the foundation. This smokestack was over 200 feet high. Operation of the steam plant began in 1920. M. H. Terrell of Mars Hill, North Carolina, came to Ronceverte as its first and only superintendent. The plant had two generators, one of 3,000 kilowatts and one of 5,000, with a generating capacity of 8,000 kilowatts.

Of note, the only accident or injury to occur during the construction of the smokestack. According to the story, workmen were laying the fire brick, which lined the little stack to a height of 70 feet, when the scaffolding tilted sideways, sending one worker to his death. This man was an unnamed black worker who apparently had signed on to work the project and when no relative showed up to claim his body, a fund was raised locally to provide burial. In Riverview Cemetery at his gravesite, a miniature model of the little stack, six feet high can be found with the name Jim Crow etched on the bronze plaque of the monument. The only date mentioned was April, 1918.

Soon, the need for additional power became evident and the construction of the big stack was started in May 1923, by a different contractor. This time, the foundation was laid on clay instead of rock, which made it more plumb. This stack rose 328 1/2 feet and at that time was the tallest concrete smokestack in the world. Virginia Western Power Company was acquired by the Virginia Public Service Company, which merged with the Virginia Electric and Power Company (VEPCO) in 1944. The Ronceverte plant was closed in 1951 and the buildings remained vacant until dismantled in 1966. The Virginia Electric and Power Company arrived at a new milestone in the Ronceverte area of Alleghany District on Tuesday, Mar. 5, 1957, when first ground was broken for the new, modern electric service headquarters building in Fairlea.

Due to liability issues and fear of harm to persons around the old plant, it was decided that the smokestacks had to be removed. On Sept. 1, 1966, workmen with Consolidated Chimney Company of Berkeley, Illinois, prepared to blow the two stacks and set off a series of very small shots at the base of the large smoke stack. The precise area had been laid off on the ground where the monster would lie. A problem arose when a premature charge occurred and one of the small blasts caused the stack to quiver, then twist and come tumbling down toward the river, 70 degrees south of the intended line of fall and about an hour earlier than

planned. Workmen, cameramen and sightseers scattered in all directions to get out of the line of fall. Luckily, no one was hurt.

The giant stack crushed a power line tower, knocked out electric service and fell partly in the river. The only injury from this premature fall of the stack was to an elderly lady who was working in her garden across the river when the stack fell. With the massive debris from the collapse, a duck flying along the river became disoriented and fell, hitting the lady in the head and knocking her unconscious.

Following this premature blast, the small stack toppled later in the day at 2:55 pm and fell as planned.

An era of history ended with the closing of the Ronceverte plant. Another ended with the removal of two of the city's most impressive landmarks. But still, Ronceverte's place in the history of the state and the county remains as having the first power plant in the state.