

A Water System in the Making

One hundred years ago, the further development of our town, in fact its very survival, hinged on the question of a resource Petrolians take for granted today - available, unpolluted, potable water.

In 1871 Petrolia was a crowded shanty town with a population nearing the 3600 mark. The town was expanding westward from Bear Creek but the wells were polluted with salt water due to the oil drilling and the creek was polluted with oil. Outhouses stood behind virtually every building. Typhoid and scarlet fever were so rampant that few families were left untouched by one disease or the other. A delegation of citizens approached council with a petition to install a water system in the town but it was rejected. It would take another 25 years from this date to ensure the availability of clean water to the town. In the meantime, the only source of safe water was the tank wagon where citizens could buy water for a penny a pail.

An economic depression loomed large across the country. Even though Petrolia with its oil revenues and building boom was spared the toll other areas suffered, councils of the time could not see the need for a water system. It was considered a "household convenience". Nonetheless, determined Petrolians petitioned nearly every year after 1874 to have the water situation in town addressed. The 1892 town council finally entered into an agreement with a private firm, financed in London, that was to provide water for the town. Even though public opinion was against private ownership of the system, by this time the citizens were so desperate, the bylaw passed easily when it came to a vote.

Optimism was short-lived, however. The wells that the company put down south of Wyoming failed, as did the financial backing for the venture. The town launched a further unsuccessful well drilling experiment but in 1895, the town still was without pure and available water. The situation at this point became critical. Refineries alone required a third of a million gallons of water a day to operate. Residential wells were nearly all polluted. Diphtheria and typhoid epidemics raged. Unpolluted wells, rare though they were, emitted salt and sulphurous gas. The water supply issue had reached a turning point. At long last, town council saw fit to call in "one of the most brilliant civil engineers of his day", Willis Chipman of Toronto.

Chipman proceeded to study four possible sources of supply: rock and surface wells (of doubtful value), Bear Creek (known to be polluted), the St. Clair River and Lake Huron. On January 24, 1896, Petrolia ratepayers voted 344 to 188 in support of a bylaw that would raise \$172,000 to finance a pipeline to Lake Huron and a system of distribution for the town.

Once the decision had been made, work began and proceeded at an expeditious pace. The right-of-way through farming land was acquired for \$20,090 without a single

incident of litigation. By March, 1896, Chipman's survey crews were in the field. By June, the work had been tendered to William Garson and Company of St. Catherines for \$20,505 less than Chipman had estimated. Boilers and steam engines arrived in Bright's Grove. Valves and pipe supplies were contracted. On July 27, on Eureka Street, workmen began digging the trenches needed for the town's system. The pipe laying began the following day. After 25 years of pleading with town council, Petrolians were well on their way to having reliable water. Petrolia's future was ensured.

** With information taken from the historical files on Petrolia Utilities at the Lambton County Library in Wyoming.*