

Reminiscences of

Electric lights come to our house

ROY W. MOGER
Copyright 1980

My father bought our house in Roslyn in 1904. The house had been built as a summer cottage the year before by Benjamin F. Speedling for John F. Remsen, whose real estate business was one of his interests in Roslyn.

John Remsen had sold the house to Dr. Woodbury and Mr. Ralph Ingersoll who lived in it the summer of 1903. They sold the property to my father in the spring of 1904, having decided to spend their summers in Chappaqua, N.Y.

My father, who had been born in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, was now financially able to buy a summer cottage on Long Island. He and my mother were married in 1902 and wanted to live in the country in the summer and enjoy the rural life. They liked the house because there were no near neighbors. It was in the woods within walking distance of the railroad station and it had no new-fangled conveniences such as electric lights. They lighted the rooms downstairs with kerosene lamps, one for each room. Upstairs there was a brass candlestick with one candle for each bedroom and a small kerosene wall lamp for the bathroom. Apparently, they did not think of a bathroom as a modern convenience.

I was born in 1907, the year the family decided to make several major improvements. A new driveway was built to reduce the uphill grade for the horses, a larger stable replaced a much smaller one, and a well was drilled to provide a more stable water supply. The house had previously been supplied with water from a cistern which collected rain water from the roof by means of gutters. As long as there was a regular supply of rain water all was well, but if there was a prolonged period of drought the cistern could run dry. Such a situation could be very serious if a family did not conserve its water in times of drought by using it only for drinking and cooking.

Washing clothes and taking baths had to be suspended until it rained again. Another alternative, which was expensive, was to buy water from the local general contractor. In Roslyn, this was John F. Remsen, who owned a tank wagon. In summer this tank wagon was used to sprinkle the



ROY W. MOGER in 1908 examining the cistern located on the northeast corner of the Moger residence property on Remsen Ave.

dirt roads in the village in order to lay the dust in times of drought, and to supply families whose wells had run dry with water if they were willing to buy it. In Roslyn, water was always available from the artesian wells in various places in the village and along the shore.

My father enjoyed the rural life, but found that a variable water supply in summer was not to his liking. In the summer of 1907, therefore, he had a deep well driven. He had learned from his neighbors, who had windmills to pump their water, that in July and August the wind, as well as the rain, was often light. Windmills, therefore, were not very reliable, so he installed an electric pump to raise the water from the well to a tank in the attic of the house. This tank held a little more than a day's supply of water. Thus, each day fresh water was pumped to the tank in the attic until the tank was full and then the pump was shut off for the day. You knew when the tank was full for there was an overflow pipe which extended from the roof. When water began to run from this pipe it indicated a full tank.

To get electricity to the pump-house, which was to the north and east of the house, electric

wires were brought from the electric poles on Remsen Ave. The pole in question was south of the house so that the wires crossed

our property to the east of the house to reach the pump house. Electricity had been available to the householders of Roslyn since 1900 when the Roslyn Light and Power Co. began generating electricity at its plant on Power House Rd. on the west side of the railroad tracks. In 1907, my father employed this modern convenience to pump our water, but maintained kerosene lamps and candles as the sole source of light in the house.

Mother had several lighting problems. Kerosene lamps had to be cleaned and filled each day. Our most handsome lamp, which was used in the living room, had a double wick and a very small oil reservoir so that if company stayed too long in the evening the lamp ran out of kerosene and mother would have to refill the lamp while the company were still visiting. I remember hearing her complain about our guests, saying that people should have manners enough to leave before the lamp ran dry.

For a number of years we had two friends who visited us almost every week and who always stayed past the refilling of the

remember Mother saying once that they had stayed until a second refill was necessary. I recall thinking that the end of the evening must have been much more interesting than the part I was allowed to sit in on, for to me the conversation was very dull.

Candles, of course, had to be replaced when they burned down. The candlesticks became covered with wax which had to be taken off, and if the candlesticks were brass, as ours were, they required polishing. My father often read in bed by candlelight. In this age of 100-watt light bulbs, it is difficult to believe that he could read at all by candlelight, yet the books he preferred were those with very fine print.

This modified rural life was quite satisfying to my mother and father who continued to spend their summers in Roslyn and their winters in Brooklyn even after I was born. In fact, I'm told that I spent two winters at The Hotel St. George on Brooklyn Heights. I have a vague memory of an interesting rug which had many bright colors. It was very soft and I recall the bright patch warmed by the winter sun which streamed in a large lace-curtained window. The winter of 1909-1910 was the first that the family decided to spend in Roslyn. Remember, the house was built as a "summer cottage." There was a hot air furnace in the cellar which just heated the first floor of the house. It was only intended to take the chill off a cool days during the spring and

fall. There were storm windows on the north and west side of the house on the first floor for the same reason. There was a large coal stove in the kitchen but the only heat upstairs was a small wood stove in the "baby's room" and a kerosene stove in the bathroom. With plenty of wood for the fireplace in the living room, the found the winters quite pleasant so from my third winter we lived the year round in Roslyn.

In the fall of 1915, my mother began to realize that life would be much pleasanter, as well as easier, if there were electricity in the house. For the past year and half my father's business had been keeping him away from home for months at a time. Both 1914 and 1915, Mother and I spent several weeks with him, staying in hotels when he had been located in such places as St. Louis and Jefferson City, Mo., Oklahoma City, Ok., or St. Paul, Minn. He was then serving as cashier for an organization which was selling horses to the British and French armies.

VDP SHEET PROTECTOR MY-11

VDP SHEET PROTECTOR MY-11

Finally, in the summer of 1916, Mother felt so strongly the need to put in electricity that she didn't give Father the opportunity to veto the project. She arranged with Mr. A. B. Westervelt, the local electrician, to install the wiring and the light fixtures from cellar to attic. I had a great time. I not only hung around watching the installation of the wiring and fixtures, but I also helped Mother choose the fixtures from Mr. Westervelt's catalog.

It was a grand day, or should I say a grand night, when all was installed and Mr. Westervelt told us the lights were working, but as the lighting company meter had not yet been installed, we could light all the lights in the house and there would be no charge. I ran from cellar to attic turning on all the lights. Even though this was long before there was any thought about conservation of energy, Mother saw burning lights as a waste. Even if we didn't have to pay the Nassau Light and Power Co. for the electricity, we were wearing out the electric light bulbs. My Aunt Estelle was visiting us and she seemed to understand my exuberance, but, being an adult, she agreed with Mother, so I went from cellar to attic turning off the unnecessary lights.

After several weeks of bright lights, we began to get used to them and to take them for granted. We had no idea, however, how thoroughly Father had learned to take electric lights for granted until he came home a few weeks later. I believe it was at Christmas.

He arrived at dusk, in time for

dinner. Billy Jenkins, our hired man, met him at the railroad station and drove him home in the cart. Mother and I were rather nervous and anxiously awaited his arrival not knowing how he would receive the new innovation. I had lighted the porch lights and the lights in the downstairs rooms for I felt the lighted house was very attractive. Mother had her doubts.

All our fears, however, were in vain. Father came in through the kitchen. He hugged and kissed Mother and hugged me, completely indifferent to the lights. Dinner was on the table so we immediately sat down to eat. Mother and I kept looking at each other and looking at Father. Father,

who had been living in hotels in big cities for months, just took the electric lights for granted. Finally Mother could contain herself no longer and said, "George, haven't you noticed our new electric lights?" He looked up at the dining room chandelier and sheepishly said, "No, I guess not." With this we all laughed and Father said it was so good to be home and to see us again that he hadn't thought about the lights.

Mother and I were both happy that he liked them as much as we did. Later when we got an electric heater in the bathroom upstairs he liked that too. Mother, however, could not resist, as time went by, to tease him by reminding him that his "high" living in hotels in the big cities had spoiled him for rural living. A popular song of the day was called "How're You Going To Keep 'Em Down On The Farm." There were times when Mother liked to sing this song to Father.