

# History >> Visiting our storied path

## The Power in Spokane Falls

How electricity came to Spokane

by Blythe Thimsen



F. Rockwood Moore, the first president of Washington Water Power  
Photo courtesy of Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture, L94-9.63

*“The history of any company, large or small is inextricably intertwined with the histories of the people it serves and who serve it, the city, region and country which it calls home, the industry of which it is a part, the times in which it is created, grows and matures. Every company is both formed by and helps form the history of its time.” -A History of the Washington Water Power Company by Steve Blewett*

**E**LECTRICITY FIRST CAME TO SPOKANE Falls on September 2, 1885, when George A. Fitch built the first generator station in the basement of a local flourmill with a Brush dry arc dynamo. The dynamo (generator) had proven itself powerful, as it had been used on the S.S. Columbia, which was the first steam ship with an Edison lighting system, sailing from New York, rounding Cape Horn in South America, and heading for Portland, Oregon. The dynamos eventually made their way to Spokane Falls where they powered ten arc lights in the small downtown.

“That fall many a trapper, prospector and settler coming into

the village for supplies, halted his cayuse and gazed in amazement at the strange lights and wondered at the cause of such a celebration of illumination,” Ted Crosby wrote in his book *Washington Water Power Company*.

In 1886, Fitch was bought out by a group of local businessmen and entrepreneurs who were ready to capitalize on the possibilities that existed with his dynamos. This group of men made up the Spokane Falls Electric Light and Power Company.

The Spokane Falls Electric Light and Power Company, placed a contract for an Edison electric lighting plant, and leased the north side of the Spokane River in the bay near the end of the Post Street bridge. A man named S.Z. Mitchell, an associate of

Thomas Edison, made a career of building Edison stations across the country, so it was no surprise he was the one who oversaw the construction of the 30kw dynamo station. The power from this station supplied lighting to a large area in downtown, which left citizens longing for more power. They had seen the light and wanted it to shine everywhere.

The Jeannie Winston Opera Company came to Spokane Falls in 1887, despite the lack of a theatre in which to perform. The citizens of Spokane built a theatre with a wood floor and a canvas siding and top. There was no lighting, though, which was needed for the evening performances, so the city council met and agreed to let the show committee temporarily install two arc lights in the canvas-encased structure.

It wasn't just citizens who were drawn to the new lights – so were the bugs. While it might not have been planned, that night in 1887, Spokane Falls may have created the first bug zapper, according to the following account by Crosby.

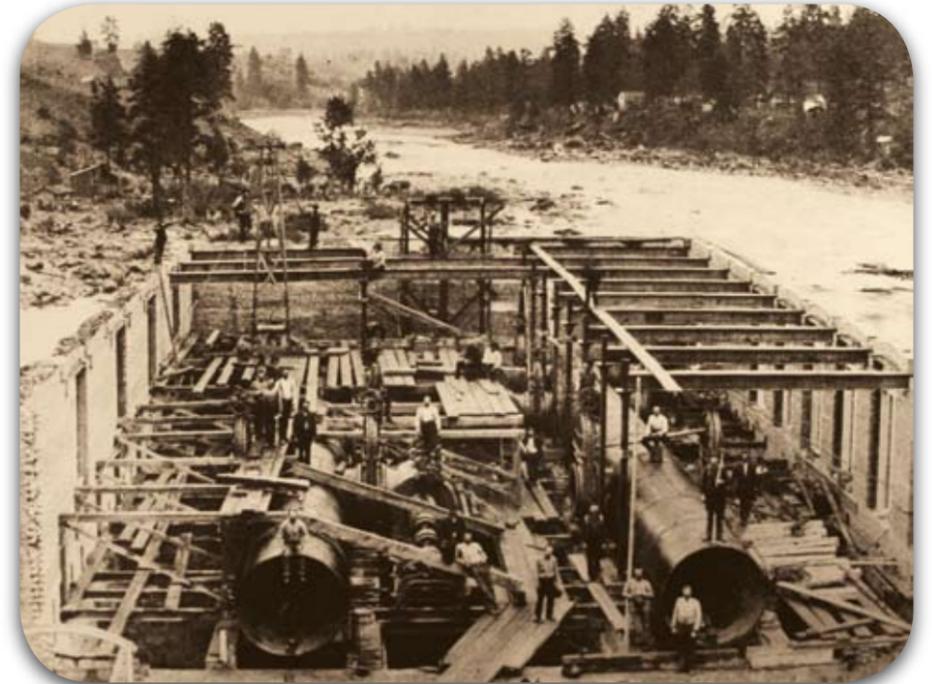
“Antediluvian monsters vied with the opera stars for the attention of the spectators, for June bugs were plentiful on these summer evenings and when they alighted on the arc lamps, their shadows, magnified many times, were projected on the scenery – distorted shapes that moved jerkily on the scenery – now seeming to swoop upon the actors, now retreating into classic glades emblazoned on taut canvas.”

It wasn't just opera patrons who were fascinated with the lights. The young boys of the city were drawn to them as well. “The wires running alongside the bridge were not insulated, and in short time the small boys of the village discovered that if a piece of wire were dropped across them, the resulting short circuit would give a fireworks display – at the same time causing the belt on the machine in the power house to be thrown off, plunging the lighted district into darkness,” wrote Crosby.

Another risk to the supply of power was high water in the Spokane River. Water in the river below the power station got so high the water was unable to discharge from the wheel and the dynamos wouldn't work. When the river was high, which usually lasted for several weeks, it was back to the dark ages for citizens, with illumination requiring kerosene or candles.



Top to bottom The stages of construction on the Monroe Street Power Station  
Photos courtesy of A History of the Washington Water Power Company



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More lights meant more power, which also meant repairs and building of additional generators. In order to finance such an undertaking, Spokane Falls Electric Light and Power Company needed some more power themselves: financial power.

Mr. Henry H. Hoyt was sent from Spokane Falls to drum up financial support to expand Spokane's electrical supply capacity. It was 1887, and there were not yet people in Spokane who had financial means to invest in electrical power, which was somewhat of an unknown. Hoyt was effective, though. He went straight to the Edison Electric Light Company—the electrical company at that time, based in New York—and he brokered a deal with them, creating a partnership. In exchange for their money and machinery, the name of the Spokane company was changed to Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Spokane Falls.

This new partnership provided the financial means to build a new station that provided power to the people of Spokane Falls in 1888—one year before Spokane's great fire. This plant was called "No. 1."

Work continued through the winter, which brought temperatures of 30 degrees below zero for a week. The hard work paid off, as the new station had four times the capacity of the original station and could service

a greater area; additionally, this new station brought around-the-clock power to Spokane Falls for the first time.

Electric service extensions were made to Sixth and Howard, and then to Pacific and Chestnut Street. One person who took advantage of the power was a Spokane resident named Mr. Bailey. Until then, electricity had been used for lights only, but in 1888, Bailey, who owned and operated Windsor House, a local hotel, came up with the idea of using electricity to power a circular saw that would quickly cut wood with which to heat his hotel.

Spokane loved its power, and had quickly had amassed over 1,200 electric lamps, which was the second highest number in

the Northwest. Where street lamps illuminated the roads, people wanted to be able to use them more often; henceforth, streetcar companies looked at ways they could provide more efficient and frequent service. One option was to electrify their cars, rather than to continue using horsepower. All of that would require an ever increasing supply of power. In order to generate more power, the local leadership of Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Spokane Falls recognized the need to secure part of the rights to the lower falls of the Spokane River.

The investors back east balked at the idea. "Eastern investors, including Edison,



Early employees of Washington Water Power

Photo courtesy of *A History of the Washington Water Power Company*

who believed that steam power was preferable to water, claimed water power had little or no value," wrote Steve Blewett in *A History of the Washington Water Power Company*. How wrong they were.

The men of Spokane Falls saw with their eyes the power of the Spokane River. In order to power the city, they sought the assistance of those who possessed wealth and had sway within the community.

A group of 10 wealthy and powerful men banded their finances and forces to secure rights to the lower falls. Together, they formed The Washington Water Power Company in Washington Territory on March 13, 1889. This made them the third power company in the area.

The other two were the Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Spokane Falls, and the Spokane Falls Water Power Company (which was only two months old and was targeting the power of the upper falls). The ten men who began Washington Water Power Company were F. Rockwood Moore (the first president of the company), J. W. Chapman, JPM Richards, J.D. Sherwood, W.S. Norman, D.C. Corbin, Cyrus R. Burnes, Wm Pettet, H. Bolster and J. Prickett.

According to Blewett, these were "among the wealthiest, most enterprising, successful and reliable businessmen of the city. As a rule, they are young men and are credited with having made much money by successful operations in real estate."

Not only were they successful, but insightful as well. "The men who organized the Washington Water Power Company thought enough of their belief in the value of water power to include the phrase in the corporate name of the new company," wrote Crosby. "By the ingenious use of flumes, ditches, penstocks and water wheels to which were connected dynamos that were duplicates of the queer apparatus Thomas A. Edison had turned out in his Menlo Park laboratory a year or so before, a group of Spokane pioneers were utilizing the fall of the water to generate

electricity – an unexplained phenomenon which could furnish illumination and turn motors."

While waterpower was quickly becoming revered, it was firepower that had a more startling impact on Spokane Falls' history. On August 4, 1889, destructive and devastating flames destroyed much of the city.

People acted quickly to save the arc lamps hung downtown, knowing it would be expensive and timely to replace them. "Through all of this confusion, the lineman scurried seeking arc lights – quartering the business district as hounds quarter a field," wrote Crosby. "When an arc lamp was seen dangling from a store ceiling a

lineman wasted no time hunting for a ladder. A running jump and a clutch at the lamp – and down could come lineman, lamp and coils of wire – beneath a shower of plaster, or with a ripping of boards."

The day after the fire, employees of Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Spokane Falls gathered to find any lines that remained. Hooking off of an intact portion of line near Trent Avenue, anything that conducted electricity was strung, including wires that were still hot to the touch from the fire the night before. There were no poles on which to hang the wires, so employees became creative, hanging line from trees, remnants of buildings and bridges.

As the sun set that evening and the burned out town was looking desperately for a bright spot, it found it in the glow

on the lower falls took advantage of the 40-foot drop on the river that occurred near the end of Monroe Street.

The station was started in 1889, but construction had to be put on hold during the spring runoff, which raised the river's level. When the dynamos arrived in town and were unloaded from the train and taken to the construction site of the new station, citizens lined the road to get a first-hand look at the dynamos that would soon bring more electricity to their beloved town.

Finally, construction was completed and Monroe Street Power Station went online November 12, 1890, at 3:30 p.m. The finished station had six Edison dynamos stored deep within it, churning the power to the hungry businesses and citizens of Spokane.



Southeast view of WWP's Natatorium Park., ca. 1905. Photo courtesy of Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture, L93-65.133

of lights that came on in the smoky haze. There may not have been much left of the business district, but there was one thing even the greedy flames could not consume: the spirit of pride and the determination of the employees of Edison Electric Illuminating Company of Spokane Falls to keep their town illuminated. Crosby wrote that this act set the tone for the town that electric service must always be maintained, regardless of the obstacles that make it seem too great a challenge.

As the city rebuilt, it turned to brick buildings rather than wooden ones and there developed an almost insatiable desire for power. The Washington Water Power Company saw there was no stopping it, and they decided to build a station that would more than double the amount of power being produced by all the power companies on the river, combined. Building it

"The completion of the Monroe Street power station sounded the death knell for the group of smaller stations which had been operated previously along the lower falls of the Spokane River," wrote Crosby. Realizing they couldn't compete, most stations closed and their dynamos were incorporated into the Monroe Street Station.

In 1891, the Northwest Industrial Exposition was held in Spokane in a building at the corner of Hatch and Sprague. Because electric service did not extend that far out from the heart of town, some creative adjustments had to be made. How embarrassing it would have been had the hosts of the Industrial Exposition been unable to provide power. Two dynamos from the Monroe Street station were removed, and transferred to a sawmill engine at the exposition. The dynamos

churned out the electricity and provided ample illumination for the exposition.

For the wealthy stockholders who had invested in Washington Water Power Company, it was not a get-rich-quick scheme. While many citizens were striking it rich in the Coeur d'Alene Mining District, or watching their fortunes amass thanks to the success of the railroad industry, those who invested in power found it to be a difficult way to make a fortune. The company was incorporated in 1889 and didn't post the first dividend until 1891 (2%); in 1893 the dividend dropped to 1¾%. As low as that was, 1893 was the last time they posted a dividend until 1899 when it was a mere 1%.

In 1892, the first AC generator was placed in the Monroe Street Station. It was a 60kw generator. Only direct current

(DC) had been available, but alternating current (AC) was coming onto the scene. Direct current provided a continuous flow of electricity, while alternate current delivered electricity in pulses. Direct current could not be transformed to higher or lower voltages, but alternating current could, which made it highly desirable because it was suitable for transmission, which would allow a company to cover more territory in which they supplied electricity.

When the financial panic of 1893 arrived, it brought with it the first drop in demand for power in Spokane. As a result, the Monroe Street station's maximum production load plummeted from 1,049kw to 898kw. Lower demand, a financial crisis, Washington Water Power Company's purchase of nearly all of the shares of Edison Electric Illuminating

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Company of Spokane Falls, and the high cost of expansion and construction culminated in tough financial times for Washington Water Power Company. Not only were dividends not pouring in for the ten founders, but they were behind in their bond interest in 1895, and they hadn't paid their taxes since 1893. In addition to purchasing the majority interest in Edison, they had also purchased Spokane Street Railway Company, and a park known as Twickham Park.

A "friend" of Washington Water Power Company, who also happened to be a bondholder in the company, was a financier named William Augustus White, of the Franklin Trust Company in New York. White headed a committee to reorganize the company and get it profitable. Not only did he have a professional interest in seeing Washington Water Power Company succeed, but he had a personal one as well, knowing he would reap a profit if the company did well.

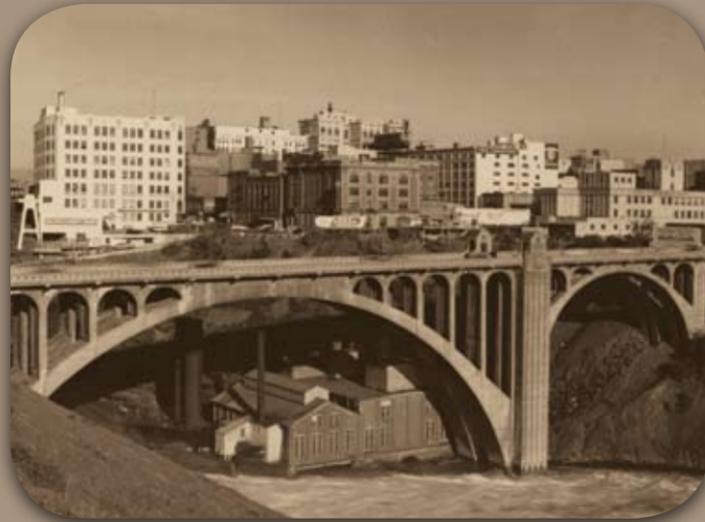
Reorganizing the company and turning it profitable took some sacrifices on behalf of the stockholders and founders. They were required to surrender 40 percent of their stock holdings.

Because they owned so many streetcars, the management of Washington Water Power needed to utilize that to their advantage. After reviewing different options, they decided to turn Twickham Park, which they owned, into a destination location that would increase streetcar ridership. The park was renamed Natatorium Park, a gem of Spokane that became a popular recreation and entertainment destination for years. With a pool, rides and picnic grounds as well as spot for dances and entertainment, Nat Park, as it was affectionately called, became one of the hottest spots in town. As owners of Spokane Street Railway Company, The Washington Water Power Company enjoyed the profits from riders.

A consolidation all of their companies and holdings into one company occurred, and shortly thereafter, things began to look up. "In 1899, therefore, The Washington Water Power Company emerged from its chrysalis as a purely water power develop-

ing concern and became a full-fledged electric service company," wrote Crosby. "This was done through the conveyance of the properties of Edison Illuminating Company, the Spokane Street Railway Company, the Spokane Cable Railway Company and other properties."

In 1901, Washington Water Power received a five-year contract to supply light and power to Great Northern Railways shops in Hillyard, which was their first foray outside of city limits. That same year, a transmission line was built from Spokane to Hillyard, which could trans-



Monroe Street Power Station, 1948

Photo courtesy of Northwest Museum of Arts and Culture, L2007-1.4.8.2-9.63

mit 6,600 volts. Transmission was a very difficult process, meaning electric power was limited to those within close proximity of power stations.

The next goal was to get power to Coeur d'Alene. It could be profitable because of the booming mining industry and the increasing size of the population. When the line to Post Falls was built to transmit 60,000 volts, it was a first. Bay Counties Power Company in California had achieved the next largest transmission in 1899, when 30,000 volts were transmitted over a distance of 73 miles.

In figuring out how to handle the 60,000-volt transmission, D. L. Huntington, general manager of Washington Water Power, took the blue prints back to Schenectady, New York, for review by a Dr. Steinmetz, who was considered an expert in the field of electrical transmission. With Steinmetz's approval, construction began, and in August 1903, the line was completed.

This was just the beginning of the

spread of electrical power in Spokane and the surrounding areas. A power station at Post Falls was also started. Having a plant located there "would enable engineers to store water in Lake Coeur d'Alene, to regulate the level of the river, assuring ample water for station operation," wrote Crosby.

As power demand grew, the management of Washington Water Power knew the planned Little Falls Power station, to be built 39 miles west of town on the Spokane River, would not be completed in enough time to meet the need, so they decided to build a steam plant as a temporary solution. The steam plant was built and operating by 1907.

In 1910, Washington Water Power acquired the site for Long Lake power station, which would begin operating in 1915. The site included a 170-foot high dam, which was the highest spillway dam in the world at that time. Long Lake was five miles upriver from the Little Falls Station, and the dam formed a 23-mile long lake.

With their ascent to a successful company, Washington Water Power took an active role in the community. They

donated 28 acres of property to the city of Spokane, in 1900, which eventually became part of Manito Park. They also created an Aid Department in 1903 to help employees, and they set up their own ward for employees at St. Luke's Hospital. The president of the company even matched himself with a recently paroled convict as his "friend" and setup a memorial for the assassinated President William McKinley.

This was all based on a sense of responsibility to the community, which empowered the company to grow. That sense of community continues today in the many ways this local power provider gives back. Washington Water Power continues to play an active role in our community, though the name was changed to Avista on January 1, 1999.

While names and technologies may change, when the sun goes down and the lights come on, it is because of a company that saw potential in our community and still does today. **■**



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