

Let there be light, Lewisburg's style

By Paul Ernst

In the earlier days of Lewisburg, merchants on Market Street felt street lighting for the business district would be desirable. In 1912 it was decided that lighting would be installed on Market between Second and Fourth Streets, and each merchant would buy the standard in front of his place of business. The standards were then given over to the borough as its property.

This occurred at the same time Market Street was being laid with paving bricks. Later the Borough extended the lighting east to the river and still later installed it westward to Eighth Street.

It was decided to use a cast iron standard with two arm lights and one top light, enclosed in round glass globes. They were installed with two separate circuits so that all three globes would make the street well lighted, especially Saturday evening when the merchants remained open for business.

In addition to townspeople, Saturday was the night rural folks came to town for their weekly shopping. In fact, even if supplies were not needed, Saturday night was the time to go downtown to visit with friends. Many would come early to get a central parking place on Market Street, chatting with neighbors or just watching the people go by. On other evenings there were movies, club meetings, Sunday evening church, as well as regular church meeting on Wednesdays, and many other activities.

At approximately 10 p.m. the two lower arm lights were turned off, but the top light stayed on all night, leaving a fair amount of illumination to help late farers get home. The lights were controlled by time clocks which operated separate switches for the arms and top lights. The time clocks were changed according to the season, as it did not get dark until about 9 p.m. in the summer but darkness set in about 4:30 p.m. in mid-winter.

A power interruption would throw the time clocks off. As it was impractical to reset them daily, on a bright day the street lights might come on and someone would complain about burning the lights when not needed. Then the next evening might be cloudy and stormy, making for another complaint as to why the street lights were not on.

To reach a happy medium, a schedule was set to turn on the street lights ½ hour before sunset and keep them on until ½ hour after sunrise. In the middle 40's, a practical electric eye was developed which was known as a Sunswitch. This contained tubes similar to radio tubes and would control the switch according to the degree of light. It turned the light on, through relays, when the degree got down to one foot candle, reversing the operation when daylight arrived.

This took care of the great fluctuations between clear and cloudy weather, although some difficulty would arise when tubes in the sunswitch got too weak and it would not function correctly. These switches have now been transistorized along with other improvements, making the considerably more dependable.

Several years back at Christmas time, red and green colored light bulbs would be installed in the tops of the standards, adding to the other Christmas decorations installed, but this greatly decreased the light output, especially noticeable when the arm lights were cut off, and the custom was soon discontinued.

At the time of the flood caused by Hurricane Agnes it was felt that more light would add to the protection and safety of the community, so all three lights were left on for the entire night and this has been continued ever since.

The cast iron boulevard standards were originally purchased from the Westinghouse Corporation. Later, they were cast and shipped from the Union Metal Corporation in Ohio, but on a special order, which required at least six months for delivery, with the price increasing steadily.

Citizens' Electric Company volunteered to purchase a pattern of the standards in order to have them cast locally. Citizens' Electric underwrote the pattern cost and when standards were needed they furnished them to the Borough at the then regular price. Any additional realized over the actual cost was credited against the cost of the patterns until paid, at which time they were turned over to Lewisburg Borough.

The standards were originally cast at the Laurelton Foundry Company. From there they were taken to the Musser Machine shop at the corner of North Fourth and St. Mary Streets to be drilled, threaded and assembled.

From 1949 to 1957, which was shortly after this procedure was set up, many of the side streets in Lewisburg were rebuilt. Underground lines were put in and boulevard standards installed to light and decorate the streets. Later, after the Laurelton Foundry closed down, the standards were cast by the Watsonstown Foundry and still later, a foundry in Bloomsburg.

The only other known community using standards of this type was the village of Woolrich, PA. A few years back, they told Lewisburg council that they needed replacements for their standards but were unable to obtain them so arrangements were made for them to share the same supplier.

Large glass globes covered the bulbs on these standards, many of which are still in use, but now the Borough is purchasing a plastic globe and although much more expensive, the breakage is considerably less and the appearance is the same.

Heavy winds and hail sometimes caused considerable damage to the glass globes but they have little effect on plastic. Also breakage from bumps and stones, etc., has been cut down tremendously and at times the globes have been knocked to the ground without breaking.

The residents of Lewisburg feel they have a very unique and decorative system which sets the borough apart from many other communities, and that this fits in well with the theme of the town.

From an undated (possibly 1973) newspaper article by Paul Ernst of Lewisburg (Life member and past Treasurer of the Union County Historical Society), from the collection of Nada Gray, also of Lewisburg (Life member and past board member of UCHS).



Downtown Lewisburg