

THE
PHENIX NATIONAL BANK
OF PROVIDENCE

Established 1835



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ROMANCE
of
RHODE ISLAND
INDUSTRY

A Radio Presentation

by

THE PHENIX NATIONAL BANK
OF PROVIDENCE

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Narragansett Electric Company

IN THE EVENINGS of 1882, one of the diversions of Providence idlers was to watch the lamp trimmer, or repair man, of the new electric lighting company at his labors in Market Square.

The busiest man in town after dark, he was in charge of the Company's ten new electric arc lights. At times they gave no more illumination than a lightning bug; and when one went out, all the others expired in sympathy. But at least their red-hot glow gave the market-place an air of festivity; and it was interesting to speculate what made them light up at all.

Electricity was a kind of fluid, the lamp trimmer explained; only it didn't come in cans like coal oil nor in pipes like illuminating gas. It came over a wire, sort of, and you couldn't see it or smell it; but you could feel it, all right. By Godfrey, the lamp trimmer said, when you got ahold of it you sure knew you had ahold of something.

By the evidence of their own eyes, most people were convinced that electricity would never compete successfully with kerosene or gas as a source of illumination; but there were optimists who could not be defeated by plain facts. Down in Maine, there was a group of men who had already organized the Consolidated Electric Company; on

May 11th, in 1882, they met in Portland and incorporated a company to invade Providence. They called their organization the Narragansett Electric Light Company.

Next day, as it happened, a Boston company demonstrated a new style arc lamp in the basement of the Butler Exchange. Marsden J. Perry, a promising young banker of the town, dropped in from his offices at 70 Weybosset Street to examine the gadget. He was sufficiently interested to watch closely the financial skirmishing of the next two years, which ended with the complete withdrawal of all out-of-State electric utility forces from the field.

By early autumn in 1884, a group of Providence business men owned the Narragansett Electric Lighting Company, newly chartered in Rhode Island, and prominent on the board of directors was Marsden Perry. He became the most powerful figure in the new ownership; his influence was felt until 1908, when he retired after serving as vice-president, general manager, and later as president.

As a beginning the company had five dynamos and three engines which were supplied with steam from two 75 horsepower boilers. It had two and a half miles of copper wire and twenty-six poles. It had a bona fide commercial customer, a skating

rink on Aborn Street; and over the bitter opposition of the Rhode Island Electric Lighting Company, the Narragansett obtained a contract to supply seventy-five arc lamps on the streets of Providence.

Most electric men saw prospects only in street lighting, but the Narragansett sold the idea of electrical power for business and electric lighting for homes. In two years, the capacity of the generating station had to be doubled, and the plant was running twenty-four hours a day.

In 1887, a restaurant proprietor installed a constant-speed non-sparking motor; linked to the arc lighting circuit, it powered a number of ceiling fans that stirred up a refreshing gale on hot summer days. Within two years twenty-one motors were in use on the Narragansett lines; the largest among them ran pumps for the hydraulic elevator in Shepard's dry goods store.

In time, the local electric power load would acquire an equal footing in production with the lighting load, and eventually would outstrip it by a wide margin; but in the Eighties and Nineties, the company still considered lighting the entree to a customer's premises. Because few customers voluntarily switched from gas lighting to electricity at this time, the prospect was made attractive by an offer to wire the premises,

install the lamps, and service them — all without charge. The only charge was for actual current consumed, billed at the rate of so much per lamp per month. Once the lamps were installed in a commercial property, the company salesmen had a point of departure for discussing the installation of a motor; they could always call around to replace a bulb.

So much was this sales approach a pattern of nationwide application that gas companies throughout the country were disturbed; the local reaction in Providence was characteristic. In 1887 the local gas company petitioned the General Assembly for an amendment in its charter: it desired henceforth to operate a combination gas and electric business. The Narragansett and the Rhode Island Electric Lighting Company responded by burying the hatchet temporarily; they joined forces to petition for a charter amendment that would permit them to enter the gas business.

As a result, all petitions were dropped; the gas company confined its interest to gas, and the electric companies dug up the hatchet again for resumption of their private fray. Repeatedly, the Narragansett had been rebuffed when it offered to buy out the Rhode Island Company. Now, in 1888, it was decided that the former had outgrown

its power plant on Aborn Street. A site of 60,000 square feet was chosen on the waterfront between Elm and South Streets; this would allow for expansion as the company continued to grow.

Officials of the Rhode Island Company took this aggressive step at its face value, as an indication of Narragansett's ambitious plans for the future; already, they were losing commercial customers to the Narragansett, and it appeared that worse was yet to come. When next there was an offer of cash on the barrel head, the Rhode Island company yielded and was absorbed by its old rival.

In the same year, 1889, a reporter for the *Providence Journal* marvelled at the new-fangled current-measuring machines the Narragansett had purchased. The apparatus, he wrote, "measures the electricity used exactly as a gas meter records the gas burned, and the record is kept on four dials". In the early Nineties, the meter-reader's territory reached only from Charles Street and Chalkstone Avenue on the north to Trinity Square on the south, and from Brook Street on the east to Olneyville on the west.

No regular meter-readers were employed; anyone who could be spared from the office for a day or two each month was

awarded the assignment. Hardest part of the job was finding the meters, which were hidden from sight as much as possible in attics, closets, stairway cupboards and other inaccessible places; in that portion of his rounds that included the stores, the reader carried with him a ladder to reach meters that were mounted close to the ceiling.

During its first quarter-century, the industry developed so fast that new systems for supply or power production became obsolete as soon as they were built. The Narragansett Company constantly expanded its plant, sending poles and wires down old streets with the new means of illumination and power; whole areas at a time were added by the absorption of smaller companies in outlying reaches of the metropolitan district.

The financial panic of 1907 was followed by a period of natural and unhurried expansion, which sharpened into unprecedented activity in the decade that was wrung and tortured by World War I. From 1913 to 1921, the annual kilowatt-hour production of the South Street power station gained 500 percent; the Narragansett Company was hard driven to build up facilities for serving war-time customers in commerce and industry—and, after the war,

nearly all the new industrial consumers of power kept their contact with Narragansett.

In 1921, about 50,000 homes were lighted by electricity; five years later, the number had grown to 103,000. The Narragansett, originally a lighting company, had become instead a prime source of power for merchants and manufacturers; now, in the Twenties, it had finally completed the cycle and brought electric service to homes throughout its territory.

In 1926, the Narragansett became a member of the New England Power Association, and later dropped the word "lighting" from its name; it was then, as now, styled the Narragansett Electric Company.

Membership in the New England Power Association linked the Narragansett into a network of power supply which embraces most of the major sources of electricity in New England and New York State. Each company in the combination makes available to the whole group its power resources; and to each individual company, the Association's reservoir of electricity and manpower is available in time of need. Often when the weather has dealt a blow to Narragansett's system, Rhode Island has benefited by this co-operation; and two years ago, when New York City suffered a serious

power failure, the Narragansett joined with other members of the New England Power Association to tide the world's largest city over its emergency. In 1931, the Narragansett again found opportunity to increase its power capacity; it purchased the Manchester Street power plant from the United Electric Railways, and has developed this unit into an important cog in the company's machinery of production.

Since then, many events have tested the strength and ability of the men and women who make up the personnel of Narragansett. Two hurricanes have ripped their way across Rhode Island; during each, the employees of Narragansett stood by their stations at the height of the storm, and then went into action to restore order and service. Each time, men risked their lives in unequal contest with superhuman elements; and each time, both men and women worked long hours without rest to restore lines that brought light and power back into stricken areas.

The story of World War II is history so recent that not one-tenth of it has yet been written. But already, the record shows how well fitted Narragansett was to meet any demand for power. Whereas, in the first great war, the company had slaved day and night to expand facilities, it now could stand

by for orders, confident and efficient. Upon two occasions—in February of 1943 and January of 1945—lack of fuel threatened to stop the wheels of Rhode Island industry; but the Narragansett Company was able to step into the breach, offering to the State, for distribution to vital industries, thousands of barrels of fuel oil from its own essential stores.

Great was the role of Rhode Island industry in the war effort, and the E-banner floats from countless flagpoles in the Smallest State of the Union. But the power that turned most of the wheels was made and delivered by the men and women of the electric utilities.

As Vice-Admiral W. R. Monroe said recently of the electric power industry: "When we asked for power we got power, and not—thank God!—alibis." Such is the story of the Narragansett Electric Company. This is the end-result of the labors of the lamp trimmer who tended the flickering, sputtering arc lamps of Market Square in the springtime evenings of 1882.

FOR ONE HUNDRED AND TEN YEARS the Phenix National Bank of Providence has been a factor in the forward progress of Rhode Island industry. This present series of short radio talks is being inaugurated as an additional service to the community.

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EACH THURSDAY AT 8:15 P.M. over station WEAN this Bank is presenting the story of a leading Rhode Island business concern. It is hoped that these broadcasts will be interesting and informative, as well as serve as a reaffirmation of our common faith in the free enterprise system.

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THE PHENIX NATIONAL BANK is grateful for the cooperation of the commercial and industrial concerns who have made this program possible. They have offered an important contribution to successful business enterprise. And in their story is contained the romance of Rhode Island industry.