

The Electroliers: St. Helena's Iconic Streetlights
100 Years of Light
By Mariam Hansen
St. Helena Historical Society

Were St. Helena's iconic streetlights, known as electroliers, used at the Panama Pacific Exposition in 1915 and then purchased by St. Helena when the exposition closed? This urban legend has been passed down in our town for generations.

The St. Helena Chamber of Commerce Vintage Festival Committee of 1913 met to discuss permanently lighting Main Street. It was decided to investigate the cost of installing three-light electroliers from Sulphur Creek to York Creek on both sides of Main Street. An example had already been installed on the Sulphur Creek Bridge. St. Helena's board of trustees (city council) agreed to their plan.

The trustees awarded a contract for installing 12 lights on Main between Adams & Pine to Napa Valley Electric Company. The pavilion for the Vintage Festival was in that block and it was desired to turn the lights on the first night of the festival on September 6, 1913. This was done in time for the festival as planned. The Chamber of Commerce reimbursed the city for \$400 of the \$1,000 cost.

Soon after, the Journal of Electricity reported that sealed bids would be received up to March 10, 1914 for 37 three-light Electroliers on Main Street between Sulphur Creek and York Creek. F.W. Mielenz of Napa Valley Electric Company presented plans for the installation on Main Street from Sulphur Creek to York Creek. The board adopted these plans for 37 electroliers as suggested.

At the March 10, 1914 meeting Trustee Theodore Bell asked that the matter be deferred until such time as he had secured an estimate of the additional cost for controlling them by switches at the town hall. (The request for bids had called for them to be controlled by a switch in each block.) Mr. Bell wanted to allow all the corner lights to be turned off by one switch, and the remainder by another, thus making it possible to have some in each block turned on when it is unnecessary to have all burning. After a lengthy discussion the opening of bids was postponed.

Bids were opened on April 14: Pacific Fire Extinguisher \$3,500; Napa Valley Electric Company \$3,108. Harry Chinn presented a check from the Chamber of Commerce Vintage Festival Committee for \$1600 of the cost. The council approved giving the contract to Napa Valley Electric Company, required bond to be posted for \$600, and instructed the city attorney to draw up the contract. The board voted to thank the Chamber of Commerce for the donation.

The Napa Valley Electric Company presented their performance bond, the board approved the bonds and the president (mayor) signed the contract. In May F.W. Mielenz (Napa Valley Electric Company) asked for the extension of 45 days and the board agreed. On June 13, 2014 a street dance was held to celebrate lining Main Street with the new electroliers. St. Helenans enjoyed dancing into the night on Main Street as the Calistoga Band entertained.

Our unique street lights were nearly history in 1959. The *Star* reported that PG&E made a proposal to the city council to remove the electroliers and replace them with 20,000 lumen lamps. The lamps would light from Sulphur Creek to Pine Street. Less powerful 6,000 lumen lamps would light from Pine to York Creek. The old electroliers would be removed and delivered as salvage to the city's corporation yard, where citizens could buy them. Some opposition was

expected from those who wanted to preserve the charm of the old electroliers, but only one question was asked.

The attitude of our citizens was extremely different at the next city council meeting. Opposition to removal was led by Ivy Loeber, a local historian and founder of Napa County Historical Society, and Gladys Wilson. The council chambers were packed with irate citizens who wanted to keep their beloved electroliers. Residents north of Pine Street complained their section of Main Street was dark, as the lights were broken. After a heated discussion the council voted to hire a consulting firm to study the issue. Looking at Main Street today, we see modern street lights attached to each traffic light, at street corners and from Spring Street to Sulphur Creek.



When John Aquila became mayor of St. Helena in 1962 he embarked on a campaign to modernize and restore our iconic street lights. He researched ways to make the light brighter and to keep vehicles from damaging them. The light poles were moved 24 inches further away from the curb. New mercury vapor bulbs in the top light doubled their brightness. Glass globes were replaced with plastic to prevent breakage. Aquila located a foundry; patterns were made for cast electrolier parts and spares manufactured. He was named Citizen of the Year in 1981 largely due to his efforts.

In 2009 the city council allocated funds to repaint the Electroliers. The paint color was verdigris green for decades. Despite opposition from the Downtown Renaissance group and the St. Helena Historical Society, the council voted 3-2 to paint the electroliers a new black green color, 'brooklands green'.

A visit to the city corporation yard showed the bone yard of old and replacement electrolier parts kept on hand. Glenn Price, supervisor of the Street & Sewer Division, is charged with maintaining an inventory of the eleven parts which comprise one electrolier. All of the bases are original. He tries to keep two complete assemblies on hand to repair damaged or destroyed ones. Sierra Metal Fabricators makes some of the parts. All are painted by Carl's Body Shop on Dowdell Lane, a dramatic change from the historic verdigris green. The lights now use compact fluorescent spiral light bulbs, which are more energy efficient.

Did the electroliers come from the 1915 Panama Pacific Exposition? Our research concludes they did not.