

The South Coventry Water Supply Company

By Bill Jobbagy

The South Coventry Water Supply Company was incorporated in June of 1899. The first officers were James Morgan, president, a local silk mill owner, William Higgins, vice-president, a physician and politician, and Curtis Dean, secretary/treasurer, a lawyer. Capital stock was issued for \$4,000 with a par value of \$100. Two years later the stock issue was raised to \$6,000. The purpose of the company was: "To furnish the Village of South Coventry in the County of Tolland in the State of Connecticut or any part of said Village with pure water for domestic, public and other uses, and to this end, to establish and maintain a line or system water pipes in said village connected with the lake in the said town of Coventry and to do and execute all and singular the acts, matters and things necessary pertinent and incident to said purpose and the accomplishment thereof."

The company purchased an existing, rudimentary water system installed by a mill owner, Horace Kimball, in the late 1870's. It consisted of piping from the Mill Brook (between Lake and Main Streets) extending down Main Street to the old Washington Mill (now the town garage site), and served a dozen or more residents. Replacement of this system with 4-inch and 6-inch cast iron piping was started in August of 1899 and completed, with extensions, by 1915. George Maloney, a local farmer, was the first one to break the soil with a pick ax used for the purpose. The new system included water mains on Main Street to Armstrong Road with connectors along Woods Lane, School Street, Mason Street, part of Armstrong Road and the southeasterly half of Wall Street, totaling over 10,000 feet of piping. The source of the water was moved to the bottom of the lake by an 8-inch supply pipe extending more than 100 feet into the lake from the dam on Lake Street. Initial water rates were six dollars per family per year.

A significant legal issue arose in 1923 and continued to present challenges for two decades. Lake cottage owners, numbering 127, were using the lake to bathe and many flushed their waste water into the lake. Water tests showed traces of pollution and the Health Department believed this to be a risk to the quality of the water used by the company. The legal issue centered on the issues of pollution, the right to bathe and swim and the potential water quality issues. Lawsuits arose, and while all of them were dismissed, the company spent much time on these issues. Chlorination apparatus was installed, the supply pipe was extended 300 feet into the lake and customers were cautioned to boil their water if they felt the need to do so. It is curious to note that in the entire history of the company, there were no documented cases of any sickness due to the water. Some of the small supply pipes connecting the mains to residences were originally made of lead, and these also presented no issues. Part of the reason is that the water had a high pH that prevented the lead from leaching into the water.

Finally in 1942 and 1946, the company drilled two wells on Lake Street with a modest pressure tank, and the wells became the major source of water. Also to improve the system, a 50,000 gallon storage tank was erected in 1959 adjacent to the wells to provide a better supply pressure for the customers. (This tank would be replaced by a glass-fused steel tank of 65,000 gallon capacity in 1997.) The number of customers was about 100 (amounting to about 300-400 people) for most of the company's history. About 80% received their water by gravity feed, and a few, in the higher elevations on Wall and Lake Streets were served by a pressure tank. The largest

water users were the National Silk Company on Mason Street and Armstrong Road (1930 – 1950’s) and the landromat near Bradbury Lane (1987+). The capital stock was increased in 1958 from \$6,000 to \$20,000, and the number of shares was increased from 60 (par \$100) to 400 (par \$50)

The most significant issues facing the company were water leakage, primarily between the company/customer connection, and waste caused by residents leaving their water on constantly in the colder months to prevent freezing. To address these issues and the general increase in consumption, two new wells were drilled in the early 1970’s on a site north of Main Street across from Armstrong Road. A telephone relay system was installed between the wells and the Lake Street tank to provide a “call” for water.

During a regular water sampling in July of 1990, traces of MTBE, a gasoline additive, was found in one of the Lake Street wells. The source was eventually identified as a leak in a gasoline tank at the gas station on Main and Lake Streets. The level of MTBE never reached critical levels, but the two wells on Lake Street were shut down. By 1992 the gasoline storage tanks were replaced, and an additional well was drilled at the lower Main Street site. The station owner paid for essentially all the modifications to the water system due to the contamination.

During its history, the company had thirteen Presidents and seven Secretary/Treasurers. All served as volunteers with essentially no compensation. The last principal officers were Al Landry, Bill Hoffmann, Bill Cassedy and Jake Ledoyt. Water payments were made on a “per family” basis until the late 1950’s when meters began to be installed. By 1976, all billing was done on a “cubic-foot” use basis as all customers were metered by then. Dividends of two and one-half percent were paid fifty-five times between 1900 and 1940. Since then dividend payments were spotty with none paid during the depression, and few between WWII and 1986.

The South Coventry Water Supply Company was sold in October of 2006 for approximately \$93,000 and a debt assumption of approximately \$147,000 to the current owner, Connecticut Water Service Inc.

References:

1. Minutes of the South Coventry Water Supply Company’s Director’s and shareholder’s meetings collected by Bill Cassedy, now in the possession of William Jobbagy
2. The Hartford Courant and The Willimantic Chronicle archives
3. Sanborn’s Fire Insurance maps, 1904, 1904, 1924, Homer Babbidge Library microfilm collection
4. Town of Coventry Land Records.
5. Interviews with Bill Hoffman, Arnold Carlson, Nelson Bearce.