BACK INTIME

Effrig turned on Lansdale's lights

This founding father was unlike any other

By DICK SHEARER

Back in 2011, we wrote a series of stories about some of Lansdale's founding fathers and said at the time that the list was far from complete; we would report on others in the future.

One of those we omitted was Samuel Effrig. Come to think of it, how could we overlook Sam Effrig? Today's borough residents receive a reminder of him every time their electric bills arrive in the mail.

Sam Effrig was born in 1838 in Hilltown but he came to Lansdale in the 1870s to build a slaughter house back behind South Broad Street near the Stony Creek branch of the railroad.

A fire destroyed his first butchering plant but by that time, Effrig, an enterprising sort, was searching for ways to diversify. Since his meat business required ice to avoid spoilage, he tried his hand at artificial ice making, and to produce that he needed electricity, so he had to invest in the new technology.

His 24-horsepower Corliss engine, connected to an electric dynamo, was put in operation in 1886. As it turned out, it produced more electricity than Effrig could use, so he looked for additional revenue sources to help pay for his investment.

Like most other country towns in the 1880s, Lansdale's streets were dark and sometimes unsafe places to venture at night, Gaslights provided the only illumination.

Effrig offered to sell electric streets lights to the people of Lansdale provided those who directly benefited would foot the bill. He would install the

lights – big 200-watt bulbs –as well as the necessary poles at any intersection where nearby residents would pay him \$80 a year for the service. In highlypopulated areas, it cost individual property owners as little as two cents a night.

> It was only a matter of time before the electric light business grew too big for Effrig to manage. Wealthy mill owner A.C. Godshall and some of his friends stepped in, bought the business and moved it to his property west of the train station. It was later taken over by the borough, which built its municipal electric generating plant there.

So the next time that bill comes. think of Sam. He started it all.

ASIDE FROM his business ventures, Effrig left his mark on Lansdale in other ways.

A lifelong Democrat, he managed to get elected Montgomery County treasurer in 1892, despite an overwhelming Republican registration advantage by riding the coattails of Democratic Presidential candidate Grover Cleveland.

To rub salt in the wounds of the GOP faithful, Effrig was the only Democrat to win county office that year, and he defeated – of all people – A.C. Godshall – by all of eight votes.

As it turned out the victory resulted in a financial disaster for Sam. His plunge into politics took him away from day-to-day operation of the slaughterhouse and he made a series of ill-advised investments - and he did it with loans he couldn't repay.

One of his creditors got tired of waiting and took Effrig to court in 1895 for the \$22,600 he was owed. That opened the door for eight others to join in hoping to get at least pennies back on a dollar. Those creditors were due just short of \$100,000; his assets totaled less than a third of that.

Being the lone Democrat in office didn't help

(Continued on page 2



Prices of Artificial Ice delivered to all parts of the town, as follows:

lo pounds daily.....

Orders left at the office or given to the drive will be promptly attended to. Special rates to dealers and large co. summer

SAMUEL EFFRIG & CO. LANSDALF, PA.

The life and times of Sam Effrig

(Continued from page 1)

Effrig's plight. The sheriff (a Republican, of course) sold off everything he had. Fortunately, one of his sons who was not involved in the slaughter house operation had enough money on hand to buy back his dad's house. The sheriff also put him in charge of the business until a suitable buyer could be found.

To Sam's credit, he eventually made good on most of his debts and finally got his head above water, but his life was forever changed by the experience.

IN HIS PRIME Sam was also known around town for many reasons – not the least of which was his hair trigger temper which he displayed on many occasions. But it was generally known that his bark was considerably worse than his bite and it was not unusual for him to offer a favor to someone he had just verbally dressed down.

Speaking of "dressed", there's an old tale about how local boys would trespass to take a swim in the pond on Effig's property. Despite his best efforts to keep them out – they continued to sneak in to skinny-dip in the questionably-clean water.

The story goes that Sam managed to sneak up on one of them and unleashed the full brunt of his bluster on

the unsuspecting youngster. So terrified was the boy that he ran home naked through the streets of downtown Lansdale.

EFFRIG ALSO FIGURED in one of the legendary stories about life in old-time Lansdale.

At one time Sam was treasurer of the Lansdale Building and Loan Association and for some unknown reason he refused to accept a dues check from Dr. John Jacobs, the "Daddy" of Lansdale and a community leader who was capable of matching Effrig's tirades salvo for salvo.

Since Sam wouldn't accept the check, Jacobs decided to pay in pennies. He made Effrig stand by while he counted them out one by one. For once, both held their tempers, but payback time would surely come.

Effrig waited until those shares in the trust company matured. When they did he chose to pay Doc back in silver dollars – 4,000 of them – requiring Jacobs to get a wheel barrow to haul his loot to the bank.

Sam Effrig moved from Lansdale to Philadelphia and died in 1938. He is buried in the Lansdale Cemetery.