

## The First Hydroelectric Projects and the Forgotten Workers Who Built Them

By Emily Haus

Hydroelectric power development profoundly altered the Niagara region at the turn of the century, creating thousands of jobs, attracting new industries to the area while improving its economic, political, and social development. By 1901 it was announced that work had finally begun on the first major hydro project on the Canadian side of the river by the Canadian Niagara Power Company, and by 1903, there were three major hydro developments under construction.

Although the engineering genius and unbelievable scale of these projects were heard around the world, the workers who built them and the considerable human cost of these developments have long been forgotten. From alienation to racism to unavoidable sacrifice for the sake of progress, foreign workers of these power developments paid the highest price for Niagara's industrial, economic, and social success.

As work began on all three hydro projects in the early years of the 20th century, Niagara Falls saw a rapid influx of foreign workers into the area. Many of these immigrants—from Italy, Poland, Hungary, and Sweden—were labeled as unskilled or sojourn labourers who had left their wives and families in the hopes of earning extra money to send back to the home country. As a result of such a rapid and large influx of immigrants, Niagara's infrastructure immediately began to feel the strain. Questions arose as to how and where these workers were to be housed, while concerns and skepticism began to arise from residents who associated these workers with troublemaking, crime, and drunkenness. Locals began to express their desire for these workers to live separately from them, thereby consigning them to abandoned buildings and boarding houses away from the general population.

Workers walking through the hydro tailrace. Photo courtesy Brock University Library Archives and Special Collections



While home life for the workers was less than ideal, work life was even worse. Contractors would exploit these foreign workers who were often referred to as “muckers” and hire them to do the most dangerous, undesirable jobs. A mucker’s main task was to clear away rock and mud blasted out of the excavations by dynamite which proved extremely hazardous. Work conditions on all sites continued to deteriorate as demand for electricity increased.

The injuries and deaths that took place because of corporate greed and the pressure to meet monumental demand were unwittingly recorded in detail by a man named William Dalton, the sexton of Drummond Hill Cemetery. From 1876–1916, Dalton kept a personal diary on the funerals that took place at the cemetery, always referring in detail as to how the person died and their occupation or background.

Dalton recorded 31 funerals during those 40 years involving hydro workers dying on the job, 20 of them being immigrants (65 per cent of those hydro deaths). As work on the power plants continued to increase in 1904, working conditions deteriorated as injuries and fatalities on jobsites soared from the previous year. One disastrous accident recorded by Dalton revealed the death of 12 unnamed foreigners who burnt to death at “Falls View” (Stamford Township) working for the Ontario Power Company putting in a large pipe. Another recorded death was Joe Ovalie, a Romanian worker who fell 75 feet in a wheel pit and was killed. It was also noted he had only been working eight hours before his death.

Despite the countless injuries and deaths to foreign hydro workers during the early 1900s, this aspect of Niagara history has been unexplored. This is most likely a result of the bigger and newer hydro projects that took place beginning in the early 1920s like the Queenston-Chippawa plant (now Sir Adam Beck No. 1) where workers were treated much better. Nevertheless, it is important to not only remember these workers but to also recognize and appreciate the impact they had on the city, still seen today.

This impact can be seen in the success of the hydroelectric industry, as well as in the ethnically diverse population of the Niagara Falls region. By comparing census records beginning in 1891—before wide-spread hydro began—to the height of the first project in 1901 and on to 1911, we see just how much the hydroelectric industry influenced and changed the population of Niagara Falls.

Before construction began, the 1890–1891 Canadian census showed that most of the Canadian population

was of British descent. Focusing on Welland County as a whole, the census records reveal that in 1891, Welland County was comprised of 79 per cent Canadian-born, six per cent from Britain, 5.7 per cent American, 3.9 per cent Irish, 2.5 per cent German, 1.9 per cent Scottish, and 0.5 per cent as ‘other’.

These massive hydro projects spurred immigration to the city where a 1902 newspaper reported the men employed on the power works included Canadian and American-born Black workers, and men from Sweden, Hungary, Poland and Italy.” By the 1911 census, a major demographic change had occurred, with 13 per cent of the Welland County population categorized as being of “foreign” descent, primarily Italian, Austro-Hungarian or from Eastern Europe.

This growth in immigration coincided with the incorporation of the City of Niagara Falls. By 1903, amalgamation between the town and village (both named “Niagara Falls”) was being discussed. It was agreed by citizen meetings between village and town councils that it would benefit everyone if the two worked together and it was announced that on Jan. 1, 1904, Niagara Falls would become a city.

Most of these foreign workers’ faces will never be seen in history books and many of their names will never be known or recognized. None of the gravestones in Drummond Hill cemetery today are associated with any of the men. The new Niagara Parks Power Station does have interpretive signage in its tunnel acknowledging these men. It is important that just like the foreign workers of the Welland canals were recognized, these hydro workers are recognized as well. Without their sacrifice, Niagara would not have achieved the level of economic development or success we still benefit from today.

## References

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