

Last of the gas lamp tenders: PSE&G employee minds a small flock



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Patti Sapone / The Star-Ledger

Like the gas lamps he tends to, Raymond Kienzle is a holdout from a bygone era — a full-time lamplighter for Public Service Electric & Gas.

Kienzle is the only full-time gas-lamp worker left in the company, fixing the company's 2,500 or so lamps concentrated mostly in Essex County, he has a baseball hat to prove it, which reads, "Ye Olde Lamplighter."

"Ray has been doing it the longest. He is the senior member and probably the most knowledgeable," said Paul Pirro, a manager of technical services at PSE&G.

The gas lamps Kienzle keeps up are reminders of the times before electric lights became commonplace thanks to Thomas Edison. Before then, gas lamps were the main source of light at night, and in some cases burned whale oil.

Even in 2012, some towns still prefer the quaint, slightly dimmer lights, which now run on natural gas.

The 2,500 or so gas lamps in PSE&G's service area are mostly in South Orange (1,400 lamps) and Glen Ridge (650 lamps), but they also light parts of Trenton and a couple dozen other towns. There are also some in South Jersey Gas territory in Cape May, and in Elizabethtown Gas turf in Perth Amboy and Rahway.

The reason the towns keep the gas lamps is that while they may be a tad less efficient than electric lamps, installing subterranean power lines where they don't already exist would be extremely pricey.

"Most downtown beautification programs want to go underground (with new power lines), which is very expensive," said Stephen Swetz, director of corporate rates for PSE&G. "The marginal cost of electric infrastructure is more expensive than leaving gas there."

Then there is the lamps' charm.

"It's a throwback to a period of time when things were slower, more aesthetic and more sort of architecturally pleasing, and particularly with respect to the provision of utility services," said Janine Bauer, who sits on South Orange Village's Board of Trustees.

Bauer has lived her life under gas lamps: first in the Mill Hill Historic District in Trenton, now in South Orange, with vacations to Cape May along the way.

"It's a relic, but it's a very nice relic and one that you want to keep around," Bauer said.

So towns like hers pay PSE&G about \$10 a month for each lamp the company maintains, plus the costs of the gas it consumes.

That pays for Kienzle, who cleans burner assemblies, replaces lamp globes, adjusts burners and relights lamps that flicker out. Each lamp is maintained at least twice a year, according to PSE&G.

Other times, it's not so easy. The old wrought-iron poles are smaller than a telephone pole and less resistant to cars.

"The last 10 years, I've been restoring old cast-iron lamps. I strip them, wire brush them if I have to and paint them," Kienzle said of the job. "The cast-iron lamp poles, they don't make them anymore. The foundries in Newark ... they're gone, all gone."

Kienzle is easy to spot on his route — at 6 feet 7 inches, he cuts a conspicuous figure when he props his custom V-ladder against a lamp post.

"When I go up there, the first thing I have to see is how bad the spiders are," he said.

One day on the job, he wiped the lamp with a slender chimney sweep-style brush and plucked loose the globe that protects the lamp (the old generation of glass globes are susceptible to rocks thrown by children, so they're being traded for plastic).

With a twist of the screwdriver, Kienzle turned off the lamp.

From there, he was on to some routine maintenance work: replacing the lamp's three thimble-sized pockets of fine white ceramic mesh called mantles that hold each gas flame and amplify its lumens many times over.

It's a year-round job that sometimes requires shoveling snow to get to a lamp in winter.

Through the years, Kienzle's gotten to know the neighborhoods. Residents stop to say hi.

"I know the postman, the police, the fire guys," he said.

Sometimes he helps them out — there have been several times when Kienzle has called in emergencies on his truck's radio.

But after a good couple decades, Kienzle plans to leave the job in another year or so.

"I'm ready to retire," Kienzle said. "I've been working since I was 12 years old."

This spring Kienzle, a 63-year-old grandfather who himself lives near gaslight territory in West Orange, had to take time off for open-heart surgery at St. Barnabas.

He hopes his replacement takes the work seriously, as he does.

"I do the best I can. I don't cut corners," he said. "It's the old-school train of thought."