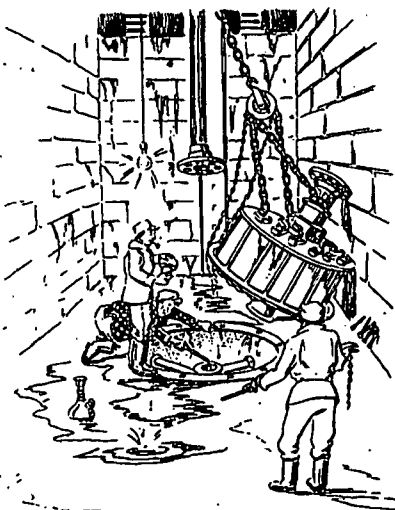




Christmas Eve In the Wheel Pit

This is a story of a group of men, power men, who will always recall Christmas and its spirit of sacrifice with a strong sense of personal experience—an experience based on meeting a power interruption without thought of self.

Every power man at one time or another has come up against an equipment breakdown. Years ago it meant loss of lights for a town. Today, a power interruption upsets the entire business and domestic life of a community.

So when such a blow hits a town on Christmas Eve a real power man, like those in this story of other years, still falls to without hesitation. To him Christmas and all it represents—"Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men"—is a living thing. He enjoys hearing and saying "A very Merry Christmas to all."

George Edwards
Engineer

Christmas 1922. A date long past, but one that still sticks in our minds—the repair crew that had to fix an old hydro-electric plant. It wasn't big, but it was important to the little town it served. Without it there would be no lights for Christmas trees and other uses around the home, no street lights—you know what it would mean. True, there was a diesel auxiliary, but it could handle the load only from 10:00 pm till 8:00 am, so repairs had to be made at night, and fast.

The plant, far from town, was surrounded by muddy roads. A light snow was falling, and it was cold. When we shut down at 10:00 pm for repairs to start, the wind came up and with it more snow and cold. The old wooden sluice gates (about 20 ft square) stuck and would not shut. Finally we got them fairly well closed, and packed sacks, mattresses and cottonseed hulls on the upstream side to make them hold pretty well. It was colder than the well-known brass monkey down in that wheel pit, with ice water over ankle-deep.

To get at the bottom step-bearing, coupling bolts had to be taken out, the wheel casing unbolted and hoisted out with the turbine. This bearing was of lignum-vitae wood, shaped like a big collar button and heavy as iron. Before the new one would be ready to put in, it had to be taken to town through the snow and mud and turned down half an inch to fit. It was some job, too, to rouse out a lathe man at midnight.

Finally, all was ready. The foreman sat on the edge of the wheel setting, we of the crew gathered round him. "Let's get this straight," he said. "If anyone drops this bearing he's got to go into the pit after it."

All of us agreed, shivering and shaking. We inched out onto the 60-in. draft-tube top on the three spider arms, and tried to get the bearing into the hole. It was the foreman himself who let it slip, and down it went, into nearly eight feet of water. Sort of white, he looked around. He edged over to the rim of the draft tube, took a deep breath and went under. In a few seconds that seemed like hours he came up. Eight hands grabbed at him and hauled him out. Up the ladder to the stove he went, while the rest of us fished in the bearing—the only lignum-vitae bearing nearer than Springfield, Ohio.

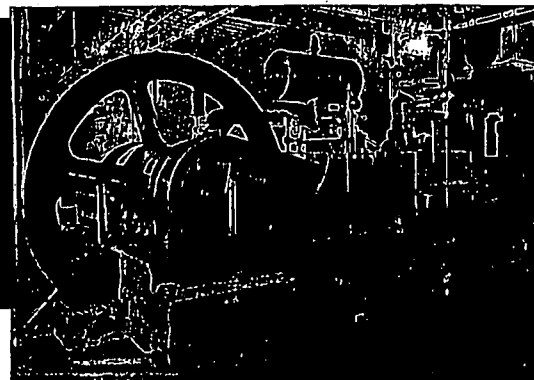
Lights burned in the town and no one there knew of the Christmas Eve struggle. The boss remembered it, however. He was the only one that didn't get soaking wet. Nevertheless, he spent a week in bed with septic sore throat, possibly caused by arguing with the machinist to come out and turn down the bearing after midnight.

Carlsbad, New Mexico

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