

LIFESTYLE

FIRST DRAFT

AC-DC

Fight over supplying electricity in Telluride led to victory for alternating current

In November 1891, war erupted in Telluride. Well, not actual war, although the conflict was described that way in newspapers of the time. It was really a dispute over who should supply electricity to the town of Telluride, and what form of electricity should be used.

Arguments over electric generation and transmission had erupted in other parts of the country, as Thomas Edison pushed for the use of direct current to power the nation's homes and factories, while inventor Nikola Tesla and his friend, George Westinghouse, argued for alternating current as a better means of transmitting electricity. AC current could be transmitted for longer distances using much smaller wires than DC current, and therefore was more economical.

The dispute reached Telluride in 1891 after Lucien L. Nunn, owner of the Gold King mine near there, sought a better method of powering his stamp mill. The mill was too high in the mountains and too far from any railroad to economically use coal, and the surrounding mountains had already been stripped of timber.

Nunn contacted Westinghouse, who used Tesla's theories and designs to build for Nunn the first system in the world using alternating current that was generated, transmitted and sold for industrial purposes.

The hydro-electric generating plant was built on a branch of the San Miguel River near Ophir, about 2.5 miles from the Gold King mine and mill. Known as the Ames Power Plant, it began operation in mid-1891. It still operates today and is managed by Xcel Energy.

Nunn was so pleased with his electrical success that he had his employees string copper wires from the Ames plant to his home on the outskirts of Telluride, a distance of about 6.5 miles.

Problem was, there was already an electric company in town, the Telluride Electric Light and Power Co., which used direct current and had a contract to supply electric light to the town.

In mid-November, 1891, Telluride Town Marshal McDonald, acting at the behest of the town board, cut down three of the electric poles supplying electricity from the Ames plant to Nunn's house. That was too much for many of the residents of Telluride.

"The action of the marshal of the town stirred up the people," Denver's Rocky Mountain News reported on Nov. 27. "A call ... was circulated and at 2 o'clock Monday the courthouse was crowded with indignant citizens of the town."

The Telluride Republican newspaper also reported on the removal of the poles and the subsequent citizen anger.

After the meeting, a large group of men "went down Main Street to where the poles had been cut down the night before and aided in raising them and stringing the wire over again," the paper said, "thus giving the [town] board a public rebuke for the way in which they had acted."

That was apparently the end of the physical portion of what the News dubbed Telluride's "Electric Light War." Subsequent battles were legal and political.

A few days after the pole-cutting incident, Nunn announced he would continue stringing wires to provide electricity to the entire town. However,

the town obtained a court injunction, prohibiting Nunn's company, then part of his San Miguel Consolidated Mining Company, from stringing electric wires in town.

This even though Nunn said his company could provide electricity to light homes and businesses in Telluride for a third of the cost of what the old company was charging.

The legal standoff continued, awaiting the results of the April 1892 Telluride municipal election, when the voters would decide whether to back town board members who supported the older company or Nunn's firm.

The electric dispute wasn't the only event in Telluride making news in late 1891 and early 1892. For one thing, Otto Mears' new railroad, the Rio Grande Southern, began operating in 1891, offering the first freight and passenger train connections from Telluride to Ridgway, Rico, Dolores and Durango.

But ominous economic signs were developing for the mining communities of Colorado. Silver prices had tumbled and there was a growing national dispute over whether silver should be included with gold in backing

U.S. currency. The pro-silver forces lost, and the result was the Panic of 1893, when silver mines throughout the West closed.

Lucien Nunn faced his own trials. He was accused of committing fraud, promoting his Gold King and other mining properties to investors when, Nunn's enemies claimed, they had little value. Several newspapers that carried articles about the alleged fraud later published stories saying they were mistaken, that Nunn's properties were indeed valuable.

Even so, in March 1892, Nunn decided to defend himself with a lengthy letter sent to newspapers around the state, including the Telluride Republican. In it, Nunn defended his mining ventures and the value of his properties. He also stated that "every citizen of Telluride knows that the attacks upon San Miguel Consolidated grew out of the contest" over electricity in the town.

Nunn also bragged, "At the national convention of Electrical Engineers, held last month in Buffalo ... it was universally conceded that there were only two successful electric power plants in the world, one at Telluride and the other at Frankfurt, Germany."

And, he said Thomas Edison by then had acknowledged that "the Edison system of power transmission was a failure and that alternating current was the only current to be considered in that respect."

Nunn also reiterated his offer to Telluride "to furnish lights in the town." However, he said, "It rests with the citizens of the town to elect a board of trustees who will respect the wishes and interests of the people whom they serve. If this is done, I shall endeavor, at a nominal cost ... to make Telluride the foremost place in the world in respect to all of the wonderfully increasing conveniences and comforts to be obtained from electricity."

When the April election results were in, however, Nunn had lost the battle. According to the Rocky Mountain News, the Citizens' ticket "who favor the present administration and the present electric company," defeated the People's ticket, which supported Nunn's company.

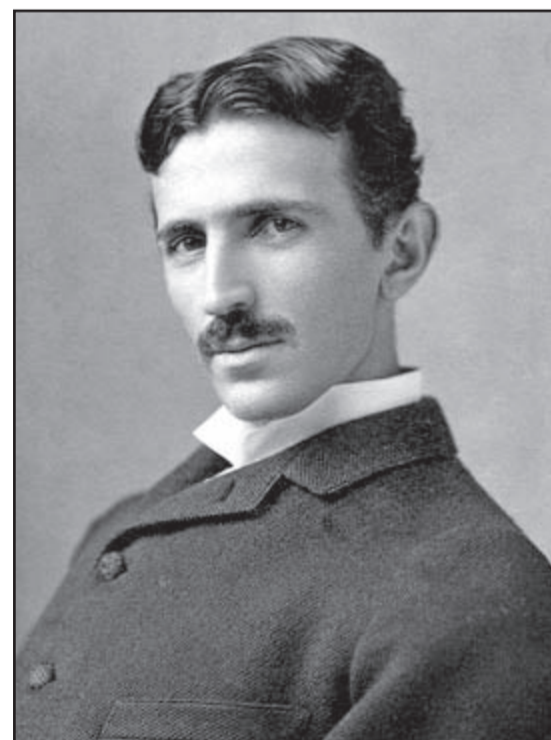
But the victory was short-lived. In June, Ernest Waters, president of the Telluride Elec-



The Ames Power plant near Ophir as it appeared about 1894, three years after it was put into operation. (Library of Congress)



Mine owner Lucien L. Nunn, as he appeared about 1890, when he was working with George Westinghouse to design and build the Ames Power Plant, which would eventually provide alternating current electricity to the town of Telluride. (Wikimedia Commons)



Inventor Nikola Tesla demonstrated that alternating current could be transmitted more efficiently than direct current. He worked with George Westinghouse on the design of the Ames Power Plant and later had a research facility near Colorado Springs. (Wikimedia Commons)

tric Light and Power Company and of a related mining firm, resigned his position. He said failing health and a desire to live at a lower altitude were the reasons.

Nunn eventually assumed control of the Telluride Electric Light and Power and it was merged with Nunn's electric company. Within a couple of years, Nunn provided alternating current electricity to all of Telluride, a first in the United States.

Nunn's legacy didn't end there. He worked with Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, to develop a program of combined work and technical study for the Ames Power Plant. This developed into the Telluride Association, which still provides scholarships and housing at Cornell. Nunn also established Deep Creek College in California in the early 20th century.

Sources: Historic newspapers at [www.coloradohistoric-](http://www.coloradohistoric-newspapers.org)

www.coloradohistoric-newspapers.org; The Telluride Association at <https://tellurideassociation.org/about-us/history>; "An Early Electric Power Facility in Colorado," by Charles C. Britton, Colorado Magazine, Summer 1972; "How Edison, Tesla and Westinghouse Battled to Electrify America," by Elizabeth Nix, May 2, 2023, www.history.com/news/what-was-the-war-of-the-currents.

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