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## 02 Water Bills During Tough Times

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# Water Bills During Tough Times

By Jim Jones

Now that Christmas is past and the stories intended to inspire charitable giving have subsided, it's time to consider an episode from the last major depression that afflicted the Borough of West Chester in the 1930s. This article is inspired by a piece that aired on National Public Radio before Christmas about an anonymous businessman who used the pseudonym "B. Virdot" to give away money in Ohio during the 1930s Depression to people who wrote letters explaining why they were deserving.

The 1932 Borough Council faced something similar in connection with delinquent water bills. In those days, the Borough owned the local water system, and used meters to charge Borough residents and businesses for their use. Council minutes located in the Chester County Historical Society indicate that the Borough, which drew its drinking water from the Chester Creek at Milltown in East Goshen, had begun to experience shortages as early as 1925 when the stream level dropped during the summer. As a result, Council began to refuse requests for new water connections, but had no unusual problems collecting fees from existing customers.

That began to change about two years after the Depression began in late 1929. Historians agree that the effects of the Depression did not appear all at once, but expanded gradually as banks failed, credit became unobtainable, companies went out of business, people lost jobs and merchants lost sales. By 1932, when the Dow Jones industrial average reached its lowest point and the national unemployment rate rose to more than ten percent, Council had accumulated a long list of delinquent water customers. Some had recovered, like Villa Maria Academy, which was located on the site of the Metropolitan [former Seven Oaks] Apartments in those days, but many others had not, including the largest factory in town, the Sharples Separator Works. The minutes of the March 3, 1932 meeting listed thirty-three customers who were at least four months behind in their payments (see box).

By the summer of 1932, the problem had become acute. The Water Department's entire budget was about \$25,000 that year, and the delinquent payments amounted to nearly five percent of that amount. In addition, Borough officials had already found a number of people with illegal (i.e. unmetered) water connections. The pressure to "crack down" was growing, although so was the number of people impoverished by the Depression. On July 15, Council decided to send final notices to delinquent customers, but two weeks later decided to make landlords responsible for the bills instead of their tenants. According to the minutes of that meeting:

<b>Owner Property address</b>	<b>Amount owed</b>	<b>Property use Occupant/profession</b>
Sharples Separator Co. 301 E. Chestnut St.	\$473.96	factory manufacture dairy equipment
L. B. Doran & Sons 501 Nields St.	\$13.20	factory manufacture concrete building blocks
Lawrence Doran 123 Linden St.	\$29.04	rental property landscape gardener Morris Walton & family
Lawrence Doran 512 Nields St.	\$14.52	owner occupied owned block plant across Nields St.
M. & T. E.	\$16.33	owner occupied

"The matter of delinquencies was discussed and given serious consideration by Council, the ability to pay and the various causes of delinquencies under present conditions were discussed, and it was the sense of Council that the delinquents should be dealt with as leniently as the law would permit."

Borough Council also decided to instruct the members of its Water Committee to meet with all the delinquents and offer them a chance to either pay up or tell Council at their August 10 meeting why their water should not be shut off.

The August Council meeting was long and painful. Before it ended, Council voted to grant water at no cost to the Chester County Hospital on E. Marshall St. and the Homeopathic Hospital on N. Walnut St., and offered deferments to a number of people. Others were not so fortunate however, and by the end of the meeting Council had voted to shut off the water at a total of seventeen properties. They included the McCormick Brothers warehouse at 17 N. Walnut St.; the West Chester Auto Supply Company at 108 E. Gay St.; Frank Grubb's rental property at 128 W. Chestnut St.; Howard Clements' shop in the 400-block of E. Gay St.; two houses at 401 and 417 W. Market St. occupied by relatives of the owner, Charles Fullerton; and Nicholas Spaziani's grocery store at 142 N. Wayne St..

The largest group of properties to lose water service were rental units belonging to Harry Siegel, the owner of a furniture store at 139 W. Gay St.. According to the meeting minutes compiled by Borough secretary Fred Wahl, "Water

Farrell 209 W. Chestnut St.		co-owner of construction company
M. & T. E. Farrell 211 W. Chestnut St.	\$16.33	owner occupied co-owner of construction company
M. & T. E. Farrell 426 W. Chestnut St.	\$7.26	rental property 3 families of laborers
M. & T. E. Farrell 428 W. Chestnut St.	\$8.47	rental property 2 families (steam shovel operator/bookbinder)
Harry Siegel 249-51 E. Chestnut St.	\$29.04	rental property 2 families of laborers
Harry Siegel 225 Evans St.	\$7.26	rental property driver Irvin Spriggs & family
Harry Siegel 212 N. Franklin St.	\$14.52	rental property fireman James Powell & family
Harry Siegel 9 N. Franklin St.	\$14.52	rental property n/a
Harry Siegel 5 N. Franklin St.	\$14.52	rental property n/a
Harry Siegel 410 N. Darlington St.	\$14.52	rental property laborer Edward Kavanaugh & family
Harry Siegel 221 S. Darlington St.	\$10.89	rental property widow Edith Jackson
Harry Siegel 225 S. Darlington St.	\$10.89	rental property driver William Lewis & family
Lucinda Lear 105 E. Chestnut St.	\$30.25	owner occupied widow, rented rooms
Domenick Bouney 249 Maple Ave.	\$9.24	owner occupied blacksmith shop & family
Dominick Sabatina 132 E. Gay St.	\$41.10	factory manufactured carbonated beverages
Harry M.	\$7.26	rental property

Commissioner Reagan reported that Mr. Siegal (sic) is a persistent offender in the matter of paying his water bills and the same trouble is had with him each year. After a discussion by Council, Mr. Dewees moved, seconded by Mr. Hoopes: That water supply [be shut off] in all [nine] properties owned by Harry Siegal where bills] are delinquent. Motion was adopted. All members present voted in favor."

In every case where a property owner appeared to ask Council for leniency, they were rewarded with at least a one-month deferment. Council was especially reluctant to punish widows and as a result, Lucinda Lear at 105 E. Chestnut St., Fannie Butcher of 204 W. Lafayette St. and Sara Howard at 410 E. Miner St. all got reprieves. The Separator Works bought time by sending a check for \$50. Lawrence B. Doran, the owner of a concrete block plant on E. Niels St. next to the railroad tracks (where the day care is now located) received deferments for that property plus two rental properties. Patrick Corcoran, a successful builder with a large number of rental properties in the Borough, managed to buy some time by telling Council, "he has a great many tenants back in their rents and he has distressed nobody."

A painter named William Badum, who lived with his wife Anna at 427 N. New St., told Council "he was unable to pay his delinquent water bill as he has not had work for some time and has considerable money standing out that he cannot collect. He will make a determined effort to pay by next month." Daniel Egio (a.k.a. Dausi Egide) of 00 N. Church St. obtained a reprieve by telling Council he'd lost his job, his tenants couldn't pay, this was first time to fall behind on payments, and he had a wife and two children to support. A printer named Frank Gilbert offered to

Peterson 309 S. Adams St.		laborer Joseph Potts & family
Philip T. Durnell 503 S. Adams St.	\$7.52	owner occupied carpenter & family
Charles Norman 301 S. Adams St.	\$7.26	owner occupied three boarders
Fannie Swayne 21 W. Barnard St.	\$14.52	owner occupied widow and son's family
W. Francis Grubb 128 W. Chestnut St.	\$14.52	owner occupied taxi driver
Isaac Snyder 128 E. Market St.	\$16.33	rental property owner's relatives
Charles Fullerton 407-417 W. Market St.	\$14.52	not known occupied by other Fullertons
J. Fullerton 401 W. Market St.	\$7.26	not known Frederick Fullerton, junk dealer
J. Doran 125 Linden St.	\$29.04	rental property Elinsky family, teacher
H. Mobalia 305 Hannum Ave.	\$14.52	owner occupied family, laborer
H. Clements 424 E. Gay St.	\$7.26	business property possibly a paint shop
Wilmer Farra 423 S. Matlack St.	\$10.89	owner occupied family, carpenter
L. Esposito 424 S. Matlack St.	\$14.52	rental property Barber family (taxi driver)
Richard Stamper 632 S. Matlack St.	\$10.89	owner occupied garage mechanic & family
James F. O'Neill 732-34 S.	\$29.04	rental properties tenants and relatives

work off his debt by doing some of the Borough's printing.

Council also gave an extra month to the State Armory, a laborer named Henry Canty (a.k.a. Countee) and his wife Mary at 114 S. Matlack St., a physician's stenographer named Frank Grant who rented at 114 W. Union St., the YMCA's locker clerk Samuel McDonald who rented 131 E. Barnard St., and several other people from the southeast part of town. They also voted to delay action on the bill owed by Walter Jackson of 123 E. Miner St., since he had recently died.

Matlack St.		
J. Cohen 117 E. Miner St.	\$14.52	owner occupied livestock dealer & family
A. C. Jackson 633 E. Miner St.	\$7.26	rental property John Wesley family
Nicolas Spazannia 132 Wayne St.	\$14.52	owner occupied grocery & residence
Rebecca Taylor 21 Price St.	\$14.52	owner occupied woodworker & family
W. Durnall 113 S. Poplar St.	\$7.26	rental property 2 families of relatives, laborers
John Ricci 104 N. New St.	\$21.78	rental property barber Alphonso Chew & family
William Badum 427 N. New St.	\$14.52	owner occupied painter & family
David Miles 117 S. New St.	\$21.78	owner occupied car salesman & family
C. Clark 432 E. Miner St.	\$7.26	rental property relatives, laborers
Mary Durnall 426 E. Miner St.	\$5.26	rental property family, laborers
William J. Corcoran Rear 121 W. Miner St.	\$7.26	rental property upscale "Everhart Apartments"

In subsequent months, Council (or those who showed up -- at no meeting did all members attend) extended some deferments and cancelled others. Egio, Howard, Doran, Canty, Grant, McDonald, Corcoran and Mrs. William Tigie all received another month's reprieve in September, but they instructed their solicitor to begin court action against the William Jackson estate and the Sharples Separator Works. In November, they extended everyone for another month and halted the action against the Separator Works. Finally in December, Council voted to terminate water service for Egio, Canty, Doran and the Jackson Estate just before Christmas, and asked the solicitor to begin action against Sarah Howard and to send a written demand for \$100 per week to the Sharples Separator Works.

Despite the fact that his company had made no payments since the August 1932 meeting, on January 11, 1933, the company's secretary, Fred Wood, sent a written request for leniency.

Council referred it to their solicitor, which is presumably where the matter stood in March when the company filed for bankruptcy. The July 12 minutes mention that the Separator Company continued to receive water service, and the October 9 minutes note negotiations were underway between the Borough and the company's receivers, with Council president J. Paul MacElree serving as the company's lawyer. He was absent from the July, August and September 1933 meetings. After his term ended in December, he appeared before Council in 1924 as the lawyer for Fred Wood and Thomas Slack, the court-appointed receivers for the company.]

By the summer of 1933, there was a new group of delinquent water customers that included the Darlington Seminary, the new owner of the Mayflower Lunch, which had gone bankrupt in 1932, and Cornelia Dilworth, a widow who told Council that she had not missed a payment in twenty years, but fell behind because her tenants could not pay their rent. Council finally cut off Sara Howard's water in September 1933. It continued to hone the process by which it dealt with delinquent water customers, but it never again invited them to plead their case *en masse* at a public meeting.